

THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE BURNING CRYSTAL

PART I: THE SECRET OF THE AVIATOR





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
BURNING CRYSTAL**

Part I: The Secret of the Aviator

The eccentric Harry Shreber, a former aviator, dies and leaves a will engaging The Three Investigators to rectify a mistake made almost forty years ago. However, he only leaves them a riddle. Jupiter, Pete and Bob start off looking for clues in an old wrecked aeroplane. Then shady characters appear and it becomes clear that they are not the only ones interested in the mystery. Very soon, they find themselves in dangerous situations including an abduction, a tussle with a demon, and getting trapped under a burning house.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Burning Crystal
Part I: The Secret of the Aviator

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1. A Mysterious Inheritance

“You know,” said Pete Crenshaw, “I have been wondering for some time whether it is actually a law of nature or divine punishment that you have to look like a penguin at will readings. Is a paltry one or two million dollars really worth this?”

“Maybe it’s three million dollars—one for each of us,” said Bob Andrews, who steered his yellow Beetle north along the dusty, winding Glenview Canyon Road. “For that, I wouldn’t mind looking like a penguin for an hour or so.”

“It’s been two hours...” Pete pushed up the sleeve of his dark jacket and took a look at his watch. “... And seven minutes. I demand compensation for this.”

“How many millionaires does your grandfather know?” asked Jupiter Jones, who was sitting in the front passenger seat and, like Pete and Bob, had thrown himself into his best dark suit. “And how many of them would consider us of all people in their will?”

“Quite a few,” Pete admitted. “In fact, Mr Shreber owed my grandpa fifty dollars... Hey, we’re probably just supposed to pick that up. And for that, I squeeze myself into this embarrassing outfit and let half of California laugh at me...”

“Come on,” Bob said in his nicest tone of voice. “The only ones who laughed at you were us.”

“You’re lucky you’re driving right now,” Pete replied. “When you get out of the car, remind me to slap you.”

Bob grinned. “Sure, I will.”

“Mr Shreber could have sent the fifty dollars directly to your grandpa,” said Jupiter. “After all, that is none of our business. And I also think the millions are rather doubtful. What do you know about Mr Shreber?”

“Me?” Pete said. “Nothing. Just that he was a friend of my grandpa’s. They had known each other for many years and met on Wednesday nights to play poker... and he lived in Waterside. That’s all.”

“And how did he know we existed?” Jupe continued.

“You know my grandpa. He has half of his living room wallpapered with newspaper reports about our cases and tells everyone who wants to hear—and everyone who doesn’t want to hear—what great investigators we are. He does that during his poker games as well.”

“Perhaps we might even get a new case out from this,” Jupiter remarked.

“... And a million dollars or two for good measure wouldn’t be bad either,” said Bob. “We’ll be right there, by the way. Please fasten your seat belts and refrain from smoking. We’re about to land.” He turned into the car park of the Waterside Courthouse and stopped the Beetle. “This is Captain Andrews, thanking you on behalf of Beetle Airlines. We look forward to welcoming you on your return flight.”

They got out and looked around. The announcement of the reading of the will of the late Harry Shreber did not attract a particularly large number of onlookers and journalists. Empty and deserted, the car park lay in the blazing sun. Apart from Bob’s Beetle, the only cars parked there were a huge silver Dodge, a dark blue Chevrolet and a chic white convertible with the top closed.

Jupiter went to the three cars and took a look inside. “Aha,” he said. “A ruthless family man, a poor but status-conscious man and a sports-loving and safety-conscious notary.”

“I know I’ll regret asking this,” Pete said, “but how do you know?”

“Elementary, my dear Pete... The silver Dodge has an overflowing ashtray, so its driver is a heavy smoker. In the back seat there is a teddy bear and a colourful ball, so the man has children. And I conclude his ruthlessness firstly because he drives children around in this smoking den, and secondly because of the coffee stains on the dashboard, which are probably due to heavy braking and sudden turns.

“The dark blue Chevrolet is rusted in several places, so its owner cannot afford a new car. But on the passenger seat is a glossy magazine about brand name watches. The sporty notary rides, plays tennis and does Nordic walking. The various objects in the back seat tell me that. And because she fears that someone might steal her things, she has closed the top despite the heat.”

“I regret asking...” Pete mumbled. “Let’s go in and get our million dollars.”

Inside the courthouse, they were welcomed by the pleasant coolness of the air-conditioned corridors. The security guard in the glass-enclosed room looked at them suspiciously, but when they told him their names and showed him their ID cards, he nodded. “Straight ahead, first corridor on the right—the office of Fenton & Walters, Room 109. Please wait until Mrs Fenton calls you in.”

Two men were waiting outside Room 109. Both wore dark suits, but that was the end of their similarity. One was about fifty years old, tall and massive. He had a bull neck and looked like a former prizefighter. Already at a distance of five steps, he smelled of cigarette smoke. The other was in his mid-sixties, slim and well-groomed, with clean-cut grey hair and the dignified expression of an English butler. Both looked at The Three Investigators. The older man nodded at them in a friendly manner, but the face of the other darkened the closer they came.

“Good afternoon,” Jupiter said politely. “Are you waiting for Mr Shreber’s will to be read?”

“Yes,” said the elderly gentleman. “My name is—”

“And what do you care?” barked the prizefighter. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“Jupiter Jones, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews,” Jupiter replied politely as before. “We have been asked by Mrs Fenton to come.”

“Why?” The man’s face turned red. “What have you got to do with my father-in-law? I’ve never seen you three before in my life! Probably those damn bureaucrats made some mistake again. Get out of here!”

“No, sir,” said Jupiter. “We have an appointment here and we intend to keep it. I’m sorry if you don’t like it, but—”

At that moment, the door of the office opened and a middle-aged lady in a chic grey costume came into the corridor. “Mr Dempster, Mr Mason, Mr Jones, Mr Crenshaw and Mr Andrews? My name is Carla Fenton. Please do come in.”

“You!” yelled the man. “You invited these boys? Why? Who are they? What kind of game is being played here?”

“The boys are mentioned by name in your father-in-law’s will, Mr Dempster,” replied the notary calmly. “Please come in. Everything will be settled.”

Without another word, Mr Dempster stomped past Mrs Fenton. The elderly gentleman hesitated, as if he wasn’t sure he really wanted to spend more time in the presence of that

annoying man, and then went in. Messrs Jones, Crenshaw and Andrews followed and smiled kindly at Mrs Fenton. She smiled back briefly and then closed the door.

2. The Riddle

In the office, five chairs stood in front of an overhanging, modern desk on which a single large envelope and a letter opener were lying. Mr Dempster sat down in the middle, forcing the others to group around him.

Mrs Fenton stepped behind the table and picked up the envelope. "I welcome you to the reading of the will of the late Mr Harry Shreber. All of you have been named by Mr Shreber in his will. I will now read it in full."

She opened the envelope, took out a piece of paper and began reading:

I, Harry Shreber, of Waterside, California, being of sound mind and body, hereby declare this to be my last will and testament.

To my secretary, Frank Mason, in gratitude for his faithful services, I bequeath one thousand dollars in cash which I enclose in this envelope. Thank you for your help, Frank.

I bequeath my house and all my remaining cash assets to my son-in-law, Miles Dempster, who has to manage the money properly for my grandson until he comes of age. It's not particularly much, but it should be enough to enable the boy to fund his studies. In addition, Miles Dempster gets all the furniture in the house and all the junk I have collected over the past decades. Have fun clearing out, Miles. Maybe Frank Mason is willing to help you with the organization. He is a genius at such things.

To Jupiter Jones, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews from the Rocky Beach detective agency 'The Three Investigators', I bequeath the contents of the enclosed envelope. I have heard a lot of good things about you and I am sure you will do the right thing.

*(Signed)
Harry Shreber,
Waterside*

She looked up. Mr Dempster was scarlet with rage. "Detective agency? What is this nonsense?"

"This is not nonsense." Jupiter replied, annoyed. "We have already solved quite a few cases. If you would like to see our business card—"

"Rubbish!" barked Mr Dempster. "Detective agency, my foot! If my father-in-law had needed detectives, which he didn't, he would have got himself a professional and not some run-away school boys! What is this, Mrs Fenton? What's that envelope? What was the old fox doing with it? I want to see what's in it before you give it to these juveniles!"

"Out of the question," said Mrs Fenton. "You have no right to this envelope. If the boys want to show you the contents, that is another matter, but it is not one of the things you have at your disposal."

"We'll see about that," Mr Dempster said angrily. "I'll tell you something, girl, I'm used to getting my own way! Is that clear?"

"Mr Dempster, I am a notary, not your 'girl'... and as the executor of Mr Shreber's will, I am only interested to know whether you accept this inheritance or not."

“Well, I have to, since it’s for my boy!” Mr Dempster got up and pushed the chair back. “You there, Mason! You’ve been instructed to sell all the rubbish from the house... Did you hear what I just said?”

But apparently he had misjudged the quiet elderly gentleman. Mr Mason looked up at him and very coolly said: “That’s Mr Mason to you, Mr Dempster. I was your father-in-law’s secretary. That does not make me your labourer. When you’ve understood that, we can then talk about clearing out the house.”

Mr Dempster’s face turned even darker and it looked as if he was about to explode. Instead, he turned around and stomped out of the room. He probably would have liked to slam the door shut, but it was equipped with a hydraulic brake rod—probably for just such a case—and it closed gently, slowly and almost silently behind him.

When the unsympathetic guy was gone, everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

“That was a really nice guy,” Bob said sarcastically.

“Unfortunately, this kind of thing happens all the time,” said Mrs Fenton. “Here’s your envelope.”

“Thank you very much.” Jupiter took the envelope, opened it and pulled out a letter. “Fellas, I was right. Mr Shreber didn’t leave us millions, he left us a riddle! Listen up:”

Dear Three Investigators,

You’re probably wondering what all this means. Despite your undeniable fame, you probably don’t often get invited to the will readings of strangers. But I have heard a lot of good things about you from my friend Ben Peck and other sources, and I believe you are the right people to settle this final debt for me. But it will not be easy. To confuse my opponents, I have hidden the clues in this riddle:

I have been given ‘2-7, 6-3’ but there are more. Find what belonged to John Fisher. He’s got money for it but you can get it back by giving the note. The key to it all can be found in something which once flew. Then ask Ishmael about Moby Dick and go the way he sends you—all the way to the resting place.

It is my hope to make up for a mistake made many years ago, so that I don’t die completely dishonourable. But I have to warn you of the danger that lies ahead—beware of Rashura.

I very much hope you can settle this issue for me. If you don’t understand something, don’t hesitate to contact Frank Mason, who has my complete trust.

I know you will do the right thing. I thank you.

(Signed)

Harry Shreber

“Great, there’s our new case,” Pete mumbled. “As always, I don’t understand a single thing!”

“You really are investigators?” asked Mr Mason, who had listened with a surprised expression.

“Indeed,” said Jupiter. “Here is our card.” He took out two of their business cards from his pocket and handed one each to Mr Mason and Mrs Fenton. The card said:



“Interesting,” Mrs Fenton said. “What do the three question marks mean?”

“That is our trademark,” replied Jupiter. “The question mark is the universal symbol of the unknown. It stands for mysteries, unsolved questions and secrets that we investigate. And we have already solved many cases.”

“And you think you can solve the riddle that Mr Shreber left for you?” the notary asked.

“We will definitely try,” said Jupiter. “Can you think of anything that might help us?”

“The names are all unknown to me,” Mrs Fenton said. “I only know *Moby Dick*—it’s a novel by Herman Melville in which a man named Ahab hunts a white whale. Ishmael is the name of the first-person narrator. If you’re to question him, it might mean reading the book to get a clue.”

“Thank you very much,” said Jupiter. “Mr Mason, could you perhaps help us too? As Mr Shreber’s secretary, you must know a great deal about him.”

Mr Mason hesitated. “Well,” he finally said, “maybe I do know something.” He looked at the boys and smiled. “And the best way to discuss this is over ice cream. I’d like to buy you a treat, if you’d like. After all, I’ve just received an inheritance.”

The Three Investigators nodded enthusiastically and Pete said with a broad grin: “At least, it’s something I would enjoy...”

The notary handed the envelope to Mr Mason. He glanced inside, nodded and signed the acknowledgement slip she presented to him. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” said Mrs Fenton. “Mr Shreber must have thought highly of you, Mr Mason. I wish you—and you three—a very good day... and good luck solving the mystery!”

The four of them left the courthouse through the main entrance, crossed the street, sat down in an ice cream parlour and immediately immersed themselves in the menu. Jupiter, Bob and Mr Mason each chose a large portion of chocolate chip ice cream, but Pete wavered between the strawberry sundae and the banana split. After getting a few angry looks, he decided on the banana split.

“So, Mr Mason,” Jupiter then said and looked at the secretary expectantly. “What can you tell us about this mystery?”

“I might be wrong,” said Mr Mason, “but when I heard the phrase ‘something which once flew’, I thought of something that might fit. But I’d rather show it to you directly otherwise you probably won’t believe me. How would you like to come to Mr Shreber’s house tomorrow morning?”

The Three Investigators immediately agreed.

“Do you know the names from the riddle?” Bob asked. “John Fisher and Rashura?”

“No, I don’t. Fisher is a common name, of course, but I don’t know anybody by the name of ‘John Fisher’... and for the other name, no, I’ve never heard of it before.”

A young woman brought the ice creams and the four of them began to eat with pleasure.

“Can you tell us something about Mr Shreber,” Jupiter asked, “now that he has posthumously engaged us to solve the mystery—”

Mr Mason nodded. "Yes, Harry Shreber... What do you want to know?"

"For example, what kind of person he was," Bob began. "All we know so far is that he played poker with Pete's grandfather every Wednesday, had mysterious enemies, a house full of stuff and didn't like his son-in-law."

"Which I guess you can't blame him for that." Mr Mason pushed his empty ice-cream dish aside. "In his youth, he was a fighter pilot in the Navy—a passionate aviator. He travelled extensively in India, Indonesia and Southeast Asia and was involved in some tough missions. He was shot down in the Vietnam War and lay in hospital for weeks. There he met his future wife, Jessica Tanner, an English nurse. They married, settled here in Waterside and had a daughter, Veronica."

"After he left the Navy, he struggled with odd jobs and eventually found work as a security guard with a large company. He kept this job until he retired. Then an accident happened—his wife and daughter were killed in a car accident. That threw him off track. He had been quite sociable before but after that, he withdrew completely into his house and left it only to buy junk. The house was probably too big and too empty for him and he stuffed it with things. He hardly threw anything away—maybe because he couldn't bear to lose anything anymore... but that's just my private thoughts." He sighed. "I had actually hoped that I wouldn't have to deal with the house after his death."

"You can refuse to help Mr Dempster," said Pete. "Well, I would, after the way he yelled at you earlier."

"Yes, but I'm the only one who knows the way around that house."

"Is it that big?" Bob asked. "Are there numerous hallways and rooms to get lost in?"

"No. It's actually a normal... oh, you'll see tomorrow."

"And who are his enemies?" Jupiter asked and dug a particularly large piece of chocolate chip from his ice cream.

"I'm afraid I do not know. He's been a bit, well, queer lately. I know of no one who could have wished him harm. This Rashura seems to be an enemy, but I know nothing about that." He took a look at his watch. "Well, I have to go, I have another appointment. Finish your ice cream in peace—I'll go pay for it. I'll see you tomorrow at 11 am in front of Mr Shreber's house. Here's the address." He wrote it down on a business card and put it on the table.

Jupiter took the card and put it in his pocket. "Thank you very much for the invitation," he said. "And if you should decide to help Mr Dempster with the clearing out, by a surprising coincidence, I know an excellent and very reliable junk dealer who could take a few things off your hands..."

"That sounds good," Mr Mason said and stood up. "I might take you up on that. See you tomorrow!"

He paid for the ice cream, waved to the boys once more and left.

Jupiter leaned back. "This is probably the first time we have been commissioned by a dead person," he said. "He was hiding something, afraid of someone named Rashura and wanted to make up for a mistake. I'm curious to see what we will find out."

3. Mr Shreber's House

The next morning, they drove to Waterside in Bob's Beetle, curled through sleepy residential streets for a while and finally stopped in front of the house where the late Mr Shreber had lived. From the outside, it really looked completely unspectacular. It was a normal two-storey, yellow-painted house with a front garden and a garage. All they saw of the garden was an overgrown wilderness behind a completely overgrown fence.

Mr Mason was already standing at the front door and nodded briefly at them as they got out and went to him.

"Look at that," he said in annoyance and pointed to the door lock. There were deep scratches around the lock and the door frame was damaged as if someone had pried it with a crowbar. "This is what it looked like when I arrived."

"Do you want to call the police?" Bob asked.

"No. They didn't manage to open the door... but it bothers me." He put the key in the lock and tried to turn it, but without success. Annoyed, he jerked the key back and forth, then gave the door a nudge with his shoulder and pushed it open a little. "But even if they had stolen something, I might not have noticed."

The Three Investigators peered past him into the dim hallway.

"Wow," Pete marvelled. "Didn't you tell me Mr Shreber's house was too empty after his wife died?"

"At least it isn't now," mumbled Bob, and he was right.

The house was jam-packed with things. The accessible area of the hallway was limited to a tube-like tunnel about half a metre wide, between shelves that reached up to the ceiling. The shelves were filled with hundreds of objects, many of these were in cardboard boxes with labels such as 'model planes', 'clocks', 'voice recorders' and the like. At some point, it seemed that Mr Shreber had lost his patience or his nerve, and had simply crammed all his acquisitions onto the shelves.

The Three Investigators saw stamp albums, toys, stacks of calculators, electrical appliances, plates, clothes, boxes of puzzles, cylinders, kitsch figures made of every imaginable material, books, mannequin pieces and countless other things that they had only seen at The Jones Salvage Yard. The pervasive smell of dust, suspicious chemicals, old wood and moth-eaten fabrics took their breath away... and that was just the hallway.

Mr Mason stepped in and pushed his way between the dangerously unstable looking shelves to what looked like a living room. The Three Investigators carefully followed him, expecting a heavy box to fall on them at any moment. This didn't happen, but they still had to tread with caution past the living room door in case they got stuck.

The trail continued, but there was hardly any room for four people among the masses of junk. With the windows closed and the Californian summer heat, the smell that had built up inside the house was already in the category of dangerous biological warfare agents. Pete, who brought up the rear, turned around wordlessly and pushed his way back to the front door. The others also surrendered and started their way back. It was a miracle that the house had not yet collapsed under the weight of the piled up masses.

Outside the front door, they all took a deep breath. Although it was hot here too, it did have a much cleaner smell of outdoor air.

“Does the whole house look like this?” Jupiter asked.

“Yes... unfortunately,” Mr Mason said.

“And he left all this to his son-in-law?” Bob shook his head. “He must have loathed him!”

Mr Mason laughed. “Well, he really didn’t like him very much.”

“Will you help Mr Dempster with the clearing out?” Pete asked.

The secretary hesitated. “I think so... but I am not exactly looking forward to it. He telephoned me this morning and said that he wants to sell the house as soon as possible. I think I shall indeed contact that junk dealer you spoke of, Jupiter.”

Jupiter grinned. “That is my uncle... and he will offer you a good price. What is it that you wanted to show us?”

Mr Mason sighed deeply. “Well, it’s... uh... the plane.”

“The what?” Bob asked in astonishment.

“A plane as in an aeroplane?” Pete exclaimed. “Are you saying that there’s an aeroplane somewhere in this house? What is it? An Airbus? I didn’t notice it right away, but if we move a few hundred crates out of the living room—”

This elicited a small laugh from Mr Mason. “No, it’s not an Airbus, and it’s not in the living room. Come on, I’ll show you.”

He took them to a small side gate beside the house. There he picked a rusty key out of his pocket and opened the lock on the gate. Then he ushered The Three Investigators into the backyard.

California is characterized by a hot, dry climate in which palms, orchids and cacti can grow excellently. Ten percent of these are spread over an area of about 424,000 square kilometres. The remaining ninety percent grew in Mr Shreber’s backyard—at least that’s what The Three Investigators thought when Mr Mason grabbed a machete and began cutting a path through the fragrant jungle.

“He was a real plant lover,” the secretary called back over his shoulder, but that was probably just pure desperation.

The boys meandered through the wilderness behind him, dodging giant cacti, admiring giant pink and white orchids choking each other, and colliding with Mr Mason when he suddenly stopped.

“That’s the plane,” he said.

4. The Old Aeroplane

The aeroplane was a metal shell of about twelve metres long. It was painted in camouflage colours, but now almost completely rusty and overgrown with ivy and hibiscus. The arched glass roof of the cockpit was broken in several places, the sharp glass shards were brown from dirt and plant pollen. Tendrils wrapped around the short, upwardly angled wings and the propeller blades. It looked more like a forgotten sculpture than something that had once flown. But it was undoubtedly a small military plane where large patches of the brown camouflage paint had been eaten away by rust.

“Wow,” Pete said reverently.

““Something which once flew’,” said Jupiter. “Yes, you could be right, Mr Mason. May we take a closer look?”

“Of course.”

“Give me a lift,” Jupiter told his friends.

Pete and Bob refrained from any comment about Jupe’s weight, and gave him a leg-up to climb onto the base of the left wing. The partly broken glass roof could be folded up quite easily, and a few shards fell into the cockpit. Jupiter stood on his tiptoes and peered inside.

The aircraft was built for one pilot only and had a half-eaten leather seat, surrounded by countless dirty switches and instrument displays in the front, right and left of the side panels. The control stick was gone. Jupiter took a look into the footwell and saw a layer of putrid dirt and shards. He tried shaking the seat, but it was still sturdy. The lever on the side could not be moved.

“Don’t fall in,” said Bob from below. “Well? Is there any treasure?”

“Yes, right here on the seat is a large package of diamonds that nobody had noticed for decades. This case is solved, and we’re rich.”

“What?” Pete cried, stunned. “Really?”

“Geez, Jupe!” Bob snapped.

“Well, I don’t see anything special up here.” Jupiter sat on the wing and slid down. He dived under the wing and tried to open the side door. Bob and Pete came to his aid, but the door remained closed. “Is there a key for this door?” he asked.

“Sure,” Mr Mason sighed deeply, “somewhere in the house.” That did not sound encouraging.

“When Mr Dempster called, did he tell you what he intends to do with the plane?” Jupe continued.

“He wants to sell it as soon as possible. By the way, he was almost friendly. He said that his nerves must have got the better of him yesterday. That came so close to an apology that I agreed to help him.” He sighed deeply. “That was a mistake, of course, because now I have a huge task on my hand. Who on earth would buy a pile of junk like that?”

“I would,” said Jupiter.

There was a break.

“You really want to drive your aunt mad?” Pete asked.

“Jupe, you’re not serious,” Bob said. “You don’t want to take this thing to the salvage yard, do you?”

“Where else?”

“And what would your uncle say?” Bob continued.

“Uncle Titus would have put a steam engine in the yard if my aunt had agreed. Firstly, an aircraft like this is a great way to attract customers and secondly, you can always resell it.”

“Jupe, nobody buys a wreck like that!” Pete exclaimed.

“On the contrary,” said Mr Mason unexpectedly. “There is a buyer for everything. I was thinking, for example, an aircraft museum...”

Jupiter nodded. “I think so too. But only after we have thoroughly examined it.”

“And how are we going to transport it there?” Pete asked sceptically. “It won’t fit in a pick-up truck!”

“I can help you there,” said Mr Mason. “I’d asked about transport before—just in case. I’ll call someone who can pull this thing out of the backyard. It’s a pity about the plants being destroyed in the process, of course, but it’s all going to go away later anyway. And then I will deliver it to you—uh—where?”

“To my uncle’s salvage yard,” said Jupiter. “There is plenty of room in our yard. By the way, why did Mr Shreber put the plane in his backyard in the first place? And where did he get it?”

“Nostalgia,” said Mr Mason. “Shortly after his departure, many of the aircraft he and his comrades had flown with were decommissioned. He looked for his old plane, bought it and put it here. In the early years, curious people came to see it all the time. Children climbed around on it and so on. When the jungle grew over it, that didn’t work anymore, but of course everyone here in Waterside knew about the eccentric aviator who had an aeroplane in his backyard. He was something of an original.”

“Hmm...” said Jupiter. “Did he ever mention some numbers in connection with the plane?”

“Not that I know of.” Mr Mason was scratching the back of his head. “Maybe the number has nothing to do with the plane...”

“I think the plane is our first real clue. We’ll investigate, figure out what those numbers are for, and do the right thing to solve the case.”

“I’d like your optimism,” said Pete. “How can you ‘do the right thing’ when you don’t even have any idea what it is?”

At that moment, there was a loud noise behind them and they turned around in fright.

“It came from the house!” cried Mr Mason.

Immediately, they ran back where they came. When they got out of the gate, they saw a young man throw a cardboard box on the back seat of a silver-grey sports car, slip behind the wheel, accelerate and drive away with squealing tyres.

Mr Mason rushed to the front of the house. The Three Investigators followed him. The secretary pushed open the front door and stopped abruptly. They peered past him. The shelf on the right had not collapsed, but the thief had brought down a whole lot of boxes and objects which now piled up in the narrow hallway, blocking the way.

“As if I do not have enough problems!” Mr Mason exclaimed. “Can’t a door be left open for five minutes?”

“Apparently not,” said Jupiter. “If Mr Shreber was known in the neighbourhood as a—uh—passionate collector, his house should be a place of general curiosity.”

“You know what? If it were up to me, I would invite all the residents of Waterside to get what they like out of the junk here... but Mr Dempster wants to sell it all.”

“Let’s clean this up,” Jupiter suggested. “We have experience with this kind of thing.”

“Yes, thank you.” The secretary stepped aside. Jupiter pushed past him, looked around attentively and began to carefully put the fallen objects back into their place. Because there was only room for one more person besides him, Bob helped him. They had to be careful not to bump into the shelves and bring everything down again.

When they were finished, Jupiter nodded. “The thief knew exactly what he wanted.”

“What makes you think so?” Pete asked.

“The box was here behind all this junk,” Jupiter explained. “And although, for example, those four stamp albums over there are very eye-catching, more accessible and certainly more valuable, the thief just pulled out a specific box and didn’t care about anything else. Also, he knew we would be right back—”

“How could he know that?” Pete wondered.

“Because of the noise he had made,” Jupe said.

“He could have quietly taken the stamp collection and a bunch of other stuff with him without us noticing,” Bob said.

“I suppose so,” said Mr Mason. “But all these boxes contain only junk, nothing valuable. Why would anyone want to steal any of it?”

“We could find out,” replied Jupiter. “I looked at the boxes earlier and I know which one is missing. The thief has stolen a box of model planes, of all things.”

“This could be a coincidence,” said Pete.

“I do not believe in coincidences,” Jupe said. “But please, let’s have another thorough look around.”

They searched the hallway and made their way back into the living room, but Mr Mason couldn’t say for the life of him whether anything else had disappeared apart from the box of model planes.

“Mr Mason, please let us know if anything unusual happens again,” Jupiter requested. “You have our business card.”

“I will do that,” nodded the secretary.

The Three Investigators said goodbye, climbed into Bob’s Beetle and made their way home.

5. A New Helper

Unfortunately, Uncle Titus was not at all enthusiastic about clearing out Mr Shreber's house. While Jupiter was describing the condition of the house to him, his eyes were shining, but when he heard what he was supposed to do, his black moustache fought back.

"Jupe! What are you thinking? Hans and Konrad are no longer working here!" Uncle Titus exclaimed as he thought wistfully of the two Bavarian brothers who had worked for them at the salvage yard in the past. "If you three would help me, I might be able to do it, but you have to go to school! Am I supposed to do it alone? And then there's the aeroplane thing—how am I gonna explain this to your aunt?"

"You have often said that you would like to hire new helpers," said Jupiter. "Now would be a very good opportunity to do so. And after school, we will help you too."

"You can't find good helpers so easily these days," Uncle Titus growled. "And I'm pressed for time... I'll try, but I can't promise anything."

"Thank you, Uncle! We can try a poster ad. It can be quickly done and costs almost nothing."

Uncle Titus grumbled on for a while, but as he could not think of an effective counter-argument, he finally gave in. "All right. We'll just have to postpone the clearing out for a while, if this Mr Dempster is willing... and I shall inform your aunt of the aeroplane at an appropriate time, otherwise she'll only upset herself unnecessarily."

"All right," Jupiter grinned. "I'll get to work straight away."

Jupiter walked briskly across the yard towards a pile of junk and scrap metal that embedded a huge old refrigerator. Very quickly, he checked around him to make sure that nobody was looking before he opened the fridge door and slipped inside. There, he activated a secret mechanism to slide the back wall of the fridge to one side. Behind it was a short dark tunnel of corrugated sheet metal that led to an old mobile home trailer which was completely hidden under the junk. Jupe opened the door of the trailer, entered it and switched on the light.

This trailer served as the headquarters of The Three Investigators. Over the years, they had developed it into a functioning office for their detective work, and equipped it with all sorts of electronic and computer gadgets. They also have a small crime laboratory where they analyzed evidences and fingerprints.

The trailer was only accessible through secret entrances, one of which was the refrigerator known as the Cold Gate. Another entrance was Tunnel Two, a corrugated-iron tunnel that led from the floor of the trailer to Jupiter's open-air workshop situated next to the fence of the salvage yard.

Jupiter set off to work immediately. He switched on the computer and tinkered with creating a notice entitled 'Skilled Personnel Wanted'. When he was satisfied with it, he printed it out.

Over the next few days, The Three Investigators distributed the notice wherever they saw fit and after school, Bob and Jupiter cleared out a large area in the salvage yard. Pete wanted to

help, but was mercilessly forced by his mother to revise his chemistry and maths instead of ‘loitering’ in the ‘junkyard’ waiting for an aeroplane.

Several days passed without anything happening. A few young men introduced themselves to Uncle Titus, but were not satisfied with the demands or the payment, and they eventually did not take up the job.

After four days, it got loud in Rocky Beach in the afternoon. A big truck with a rusty plane wreck rolled through the sleepy streets and woke up its residents. As it stopped in front of The Jones Salvage Yard, it pulled a honking convoy of cars and a large group of jeering children and teenagers behind it.

Since the aeroplane on the loading area was so high that it would have torn down the company sign above the gate, the two drivers and their three helpers let the plane slowly roll down the ramp on a winch, and then Uncle Titus climbed into a borrowed tractor and pulled it very slowly to the cleared space next to a pile of scrap metal. Aunt Mathilda stood in front of the office and watched the spectacle, shaking her head.

One of the men read the notice ‘Skilled Personnel Wanted’ and drew the attention of his colleagues. However, they eventually climbed back into their truck and drove away without talking to Uncle Titus. Gradually the crowd of onlookers dispersed and Jupiter, Pete and Bob finally had time to take a closer look at the plane.

Now that it stood in the yard, free from the confinement of plants, it seemed even bigger and more massive... and crappier. The paint flaked off everywhere revealing huge rusted parts. A few tendrils still hung down from the tail fin and ailerons.

“Well,” Pete said after a while. “It looks splendid. How about it, Bob—fancy a little flight into space?”

“Yeah, sure, absolutely.” Bob looked at the wreck. “What a monster. I wonder how old it is.”

“At least fifty years,” said Pete. “And what should we be looking for now?”

“Look for a clue,” Jupiter suggested. He then went to his open-air workshop and came back with a toolbox. “Let’s try to open the side door.”

Pete and Bob found some wrenches, hammers and oil bottles in the toolbox and started to pry on the door handle. After a while, they managed to move it. With their combined forces, they pushed the handle down and the door swung open with a gruesome creak.

Behind it was darkness, which still smelled of oil even after so long. Bob took a flashlight out of the toolbox and shone it into the cavity. A few spiders fled from the light into a tangle of pipes and poles.

“Let me guess,” Pete said. “There’s another package of diamonds.”

“That’s right,” Bob said. At the same moment, the beam of light glided over something white that was stuck behind a pipe. “No, wait! There’s something on the side—an envelope! Hold on, I’ll get it!”

He quickly climbed into the metal fuselage. The whole plane swayed under his steps. Bob ignored the crawling spiders and detached the envelope from the wall. “It is addressed to us! But there’s no indication of the sender.” He climbed back outside and handed the envelope to Jupiter, who carefully opened it.

Inside was an old black and white photo showing three men and a woman playing cards. The three men wore US Navy uniforms, and they looked about the same age—probably in their mid-thirties. The woman wore a tight-fitting, high-necked black dress. Her black hair was pinned up to form an elegant hairstyle. Her face could be seen in profile, showing the classic beauty of a movie actress, and on her left wrist sparkled a whole range of diamond-

studded bracelets. On the back of the photo were the words 'Cochin Big Blind 1972' and below were several characters of a language The Three Investigators had never seen before.

"Let's go to Headquarters," said Jupiter.

The three of them slipped through the Cold Gate and gathered inside the trailer. Jupiter immediately made a photocopy of the front and the back of the photo for safekeeping. Then he threw himself on the desk chair and turned on the computer. "Let's see if I can find 'Cochin Big Blind' on the Internet." He typed the words into the search engine. "Uh-huh. No results for these terms, but Cochin is a port city in South India. However, it has been renamed and is now called Kochi. It has one of the largest ship-building and maintenance facility in India."

"If the words aren't connected, then maybe I know what 'Big Blind' means," Pete said. "The four people in the photo are playing poker. A 'Big Blind' is a mandatory bet used in poker variations that typically don't have antes."

"Poker!" Jupiter listened. "It's possible. Since when do you play poker, Pete?"

"Never... but my mum has been playing it for a few months. Her group meet every Friday evening, and she has been betting one continent or another as a 'Big Blind'. Anyway, she has already lost North America seven times!"

"So these four people played poker in Cochin in 1972," Bob summarized. "Who were these three people? And what do these strange characters mean? Why didn't Mr Shreber just put this photo in his will?"

"Maybe the photo has something to do with the plane." They checked the photo for fingerprints, but found nothing. "As if someone had wiped off the fingerprints on the photo," mumbled Jupiter. "Strange... Let's call Mr Mason. Maybe he knows something about this."

The former secretary answered almost immediately. "Frank Mason speaking."

"Hello, Mr Mason," Jupiter said. "This is Jupiter Jones of The Three Investigators."

"Jupiter!" The man sounded pleased. "Have you found out anything yet?"

"We have found something, but we do not yet know what it means. It's a photograph of three men and a woman playing cards. Behind the photo are written the words 'Cochin Big Blind 1972'. Do you know anything about it?"

"That's odd. Where did you find it?"

"It was in the plane, in an envelope addressed to us. Mr Shreber must have put it there."

"Hmm..." said Mr Mason. "Yes... yes, I know that photo—photos, to be precise. For the last two years, Mr Shreber has received them over and over again by post... with no return address and it was always the same photo."

"And what did he say to that?"

"Nothing at first. I knew nothing about it," Mr Mason replied. "But one day I found one of them on the floor. It had probably fallen down accidentally. I picked it up and gave it to him and he became furious. He shouted at me that I shouldn't have been prying into his private affairs—although that was the job he paid me to do. Anyway, he put the photo away immediately. After that, he was very irritable and nervous, forgot all kinds of things and finally threw me out."

"He fired you?"

"No, no," said Mr Mason quickly. "He just didn't want to see me for the rest of the day. However, on the following day, he was as usual. He never spoke about that photograph again, but after his death, I found at least ten of them in his desk drawer."

"Do you still have the photos? And the envelopes?"

"No, unfortunately. I threw them away."

Jupiter suppressed a sigh. "Did you recognize any of the people in the photo?" he asked.

“Yes, Harry was in it of course,” Mr Mason said. “He was younger then. But for the rest of people, I can’t say that I know them.”

“Do you perhaps remember anything related to the envelopes?” Jupe continued. “Were they stamped? Did they look unusual? Did they smell strangely? Was anything else written on them?”

“Jupiter, I’m not an investigator and I didn’t know that one day investigators would be interested,” said Mr Mason with a slight rebuke in his voice. “I remember that they had stamps from India, I think. Apart from Mr Shreber’s name and address, nothing else was written on them. There was no return address.”

“Aha,” said Jupiter. “It’s a pity that you don’t have them anymore. Thanks anyway.”

“You’re welcome. I hope you can make something out of it.”

Annoyed, Jupiter put down the phone. “That is typical! The whole house is full of stuff and junk, and Mr Mason disposes off the only thing that would have been of interest to us!”

“It’s unfortunate,” said Pete. “He couldn’t have known...”

“Jupe!” cried Aunt Mathilda from outside. “Pete! Bob! Where are you? Please come out!”

“We are on our way!” Jupiter called back.

They left Headquarters through the tunnel leading to the Cold Gate. Before Bob opened the fridge door, he peered outside through a peephole. There was little point in creating a secret opening when dozens of customers could watch The Three Investigators climb out of a fridge. As the coast was clear, the three of them sneaked out one by one.

They would have liked to investigate the plane further, but Aunt Mathilda waved them over impatiently. She and Uncle Titus stood with a man in front of the office and skilfully flanked him so that he had his back to the fridge. The man was wearing work clothes—blue overalls and thick shoes with steel toecaps.

As The Three Investigators approached, he turned around and looked at them with a frown. He was tall and broad-shouldered and looked as if he could easily carry a steel beam alone.

“So, these are our investigators,” said Uncle Titus. “Our nephew Jupiter and his friends Pete and Bob. Boys, this is Jim Cooper. He’s going to help us out here in the yard, in particular, the loading and unloading, repair work, transportation and so on. Anyway, he’ll be on trial here first to see if it works out.”

Surprised, The Three Investigators looked at the stranger. They had not expected a response to the notices so quickly.

“He already knows which areas he shouldn’t touch,” Uncle Titus continued, laughing a little nervously. “Scrap heap, open-air workshop and the plane are yours... but it’ll be all right, won’t it, Jim?”

“Sure,” Jim said in a deep voice, glaring at the three boys as if they were something he would like to shove into a scrap press. “As long as they stay out of my area. Children always create chaos. And kids playing detectives are the worst.”

Everyone gasped for breath, even Aunt Mathilda, who would have wholeheartedly agreed with him.

Jupiter was the first to recover. “The correct term is ‘youth’. But don’t worry, Mr Cooper, we will not get in your way. Come, fellas—we have work to do!”

As they left, they heard Uncle Titus say: “Really, Jim, the boys are a great help to us here —”

“It’s all right, Mr Jones,” Jim replied. “I just want them to stay out of my way at work, that’s all.”

Out of sight, behind the pile of scrap metal, Pete let out his anger. “Kids playing detectives? Has he lost his mind? And your uncle hires one of these people?”

“Uncle Titus just needs help,” said Jupiter. “Or do you really want to clean up Mr Shreber’s house? But you’re right, I’m not happy with Jim Cooper’s remarks.”

“Why can’t Hans and Konrad come back?” Bob said. “We got along fine with them—even when we were kids playing detectives.”

“They now have their own business,” replied Jupiter, “otherwise Uncle Titus would have asked them to come back long ago. It’s no use, fellas, we have to come to terms with it. Meanwhile, we had better get on with our case.”

Using some cleverly placed bedsteads, they climbed over the pile of scrap metal to Jupiter’s open-air workshop and returned to Headquarters through Tunnel Two. There they looked at the photo again, but could no longer find anything conspicuous. They flinched a few times when loud crashing, screeching and rattling at the yard indicated that Jim had started his work with great commitment.

“This photo means nothing to me,” Pete confessed. “Three men in Navy uniforms, a woman and some mysterious words. What kind of characters are that?”

“Looks like an Indian script, but there are so many of them,” Bob said. “I’ll try to find out something about that.”

“Look for something about Mr Shreber too. Maybe there was once a report about him in the newspapers as not everyone has a plane in their backyard... and about this Rashura.” Jupiter took a look at his watch. “It’s almost dinner time, fellas. We’ll continue tomorrow.”

6. The Night Visitor

In the middle of the night, Jupiter woke up. For a moment, he was still trapped in the confusion of his dream—people without faces, sitting around boxes full of junk, apparently playing poker, each holding a single huge playing card. In between, Jim Cooper was walking around in his blue overalls, but he had shrunk to the size of a chimpanzee and was constantly screaming: ‘Kids playing detectives are the worst!’ But the most insane was Aunt Mathilda, who wore an old aviator’s uniform and pilot’s glasses, and Uncle Titus explained that she had always wanted her own plane.

Jupiter shook off the dream with determination. Why had he woken up? The full moon shone right into his face and the room was as bright as day. But that was not what had woken him up.

He lay still and listened. He was as used to the roar of the Pacific Ocean as he was to the sound of passing cars on the coastal road. But there had been some noise that should not be there at this time of the day.

Clang! There it was again—not very loud, just clear enough to attract attention.

Jupiter swung out of bed and went to the window. From here, he could see the salvage yard... and a movement at the main gate.

There was someone there! A dark figure was tampering with the padlock.

“That’s interesting,” mumbled Jupiter.

He quickly dressed, grabbed a flashlight, went down the stairs and left the house.

The Joneses live in a two-storey house just outside the salvage yard. There was a gate between the house and the yard. Jupiter quickly ran past the gate into the yard.

Crouching down, he crept under the canopy where Uncle Titus kept objects that were a little more valuable or needed protection from the rare downpours. Carefully, so as not to hit anything, he crept through the shade and behind a pile of scrap metal. From here, he could not see the intruder and was therefore safe from being seen. He slipped through the Cold Gate and scampered into Headquarters. There he grabbed his digital camera, crept back through the tunnel to the Cold Gate, carefully opened the refrigerator door and peered out.

There was clanging for a few more times, but then the night visitor apparently realized that he could not open the padlock without bolt cutters, and gave up trying.

For a few seconds, it was completely silent, only the distant roar of the ocean could be heard. Suddenly, Jupiter saw the figure at the top of the fence next to the main gate. Having failed to break the lock, he decided to climb over the fence. The intruder looked around briefly and then jumped to the ground. Jupiter held his breath.

After a short break, the intruder crept across the yard towards the plane. Jupiter switched on the digital camera.

The Three Investigators had not bothered to close the side door of the plane. The dark figure shone a flashlight into the darkness and then swung through the opening with a deft touch. The beam of light wandered through the interior. Apparently he was looking for something.

On tiptoe, Jupiter sneaked forward. If he could close the door and lock the intruder inside the plane...

Three more steps...

Two more...

Jupiter stretched out his hand.

At that moment, the door of the Jones house opened, bright light flooded into the salvage yard and Aunt Mathilda's impressive figure appeared.

"Jupe!" she cried out loud. "Jupe, are you out there?"

The intruder froze. Jupiter immediately threw himself against the door, but the intruder did the same from inside and pushed him away. Jupiter stumbled backwards and the intruder jumped from the plane to the ground. In a flash, the First Investigator pulled up the camera and pressed the shutter release.

There was a glaring flash. The intruder turned around and ran to the part of the fence where he had climbed in from.

Jupiter pulled himself up and set out in pursuit, but the intruder was faster and effortlessly swung himself over the fence. The First Investigator heard him landing awkwardly at the other side, stumbled a few steps, and then ran down the street.

Jupiter, who would only have made it over the fence with the help of a trampoline at most, ran to the back of the salvage yard. There he activated the opening mechanism of Red Gate Rover—one of their secret entrances to the yard—and several boards swung up. Jupe then squeezed through the opening into the street, ran along the fence and was just in time to see the intruder running across the main street towards the coastal road. When Jupiter arrived at the main street panting, there was no one to be seen.

Aunt Mathilda put her hands on her hips when she saw her nephew coming back with the flashlight. "What is the matter, Jupe? Do you know what time it is?"

"There was an intruder," explained Jupiter succinctly.

"For goodness' sake! We'll call the police immediately!"

"He was only interested in the plane." Jupiter turned on the camera and checked if the photo had turned out all right. A blurred figure appeared on the display. "He is a light-haired man in black clothes. Not very helpful. I don't think the police can do anything with it."

"I knew it," said his aunt. "As soon as you take on a new case, there's trouble again. I hope that this plane will soon be gone! What was your uncle thinking, allowing you to bring it here? And I really think we should get a dog. I can't count how many times people have been sneaking around the yard when they have no business being here."

"Yes, Aunt Mathilda," said Jupiter, a little irritated. Of course, his aunt had every right to worry, but her appearance had ruined a promising situation. "I am going to bed now. Good night."

"Did he take anything with him?" Pete asked when they met at Headquarters the next afternoon.

"A few spiders at the most, and I don't mourn them."

"That's funny," Bob said. "Who would be interested in a rusty wreck like that? And why now, after decades of it standing in Mr Shreber's backyard?" He took three cans of soda from the fridge, handed them out and threw himself onto a battered armchair.

"Perhaps coincidence," Pete said in a doubtful tone of voice. "He just wanted to break into the salvage yard, discovered the plane and looked to see what there was to pick up."

Jupiter was sitting at the computer, but had turned it off and put his legs on the table. "That is of course possible but he walked purposefully straight towards the plane... and he seemed to be looking for something... but maybe he didn't know what."

“Did you find fingerprints on the door?” Bob asked.

“No, he wore gloves. I’ve been thinking about this break-in all morning, but I’m getting nowhere.” Brooding, Jupiter stared at the computer monitor for a while and then shook his head. “Maybe he will try again. Until then, we’ll work with what we already have. Did you find out anything about Rashura?”

“No, nothing at all,” Bob replied. “I want to call Miss Bennett, maybe she’s heard that word before.”

Jupiter pushed the phone towards him.

But neither did Miss Bennett, the head of the Rocky Beach Public Library, hear about Rashura. “What makes you think it has to be a personal name,” she asked. “Maybe it’s something completely different—an object or an organization?”

“Yes, maybe,” Bob agreed with a sigh. “Thanks anyway!” He hung up. “Well, fellas, no dice. Don’t we know anyone who understands Indian languages?”

“Remember that professor?” Pete recalled. “What was his name?”

“Meeker,” Jupiter said as he could remember many names. “Professor Wilton J. Meeker. He is a professor of American Indian languages.”

“But I don’t think what we have behind the photo was written in an American Indian language,” Bob remarked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jupiter countered. “He might know someone who knows this language. We might as well give it a try.”

However, Professor Meeker did not answer the phone so Jupiter left a message on his answering machine.

“All right,” said Jupiter. “Let’s take another look at the plane. This time we are looking for something hidden. The envelope was placed in such a way that we would see it immediately, but maybe Mr Shreber left more clues.”

At that moment, the phone rang. Jupiter picked up the handset and switched on the loudspeaker so that his friends could listen in. “The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking.”

“Jupiter!” a breathless voice interrupted him. “This is Frank Mason...”

“Hello, Mr Mason! Do you have anything new for us? Or can we help you with something?”

“Well... you told me to call you if anything—uh—unusual happened. How unusual do you think it is for me to have caught a burglar right here in Mr Shreber’s living room?”

7. Mr Mason is Attacked

Pete and Bob opened their eyes wide as Jupiter jumped up. “We definitely find that remarkable. Hold him tight, we’ll be right there! Have you called the police—”

“No! No police! I can handle this—Hey! Goodness, there’s someone else here! And I can’t—come quickly! Help!”

There was a clattering sound, as if the mobile phone had fallen to the ground, and then they heard fighting noises.

“Mr Mason!” cried Jupiter. “We’ll be right there!”

Instead of an answer they heard a scream... then a loud crash... then silence.

The Three Investigators rushed outside through the Cold Gate and ran to Bob’s Beetle, which was parked in the yard.

“Jupe!” Uncle Titus called out from the office. “Wait! There’s a—”

“No time, Uncle Titus! Emergency!” Jupiter gasped as he ran past. “Sorry!”

“But it’s about the—”

“Later!”

They threw themselves into the Beetle, Bob turned, left the yard and accelerated.

Twenty minutes later, the Beetle stopped in front of Mr Shreber’s house. There was no other car there and nobody was to be seen on the peaceful residential street. The Three Investigators got out and ran to the front door. It was closed and locked.

Bob pressed his ear against the wood. “Nothing... Mr Mason! Are you in there? Are you all right?”

No one answered.

“This is a very old-fashioned lock and it will take me some time to pick it,” Pete remarked. “Is there another way into the house?”

“Let’s try through the backyard,” Jupiter decided.

They ran to the side gate and pushed their way between the piled-up junk. With a quick mind, Jupiter grabbed the machete and they dived into the wilderness of the backyard.

This time it was easier to get through. Mr Mason had already cleared the way once, and the place where the plane had been standing was now a clearing. A wide strip of flattened plants and a flipped-over fence revealed how the plane had been hauled away.

Jupiter hacked his way to the patio door, but it was of course closed and locked. They peered through the glass and saw a mountain of overturned boxes and shelves.

“Mr Mason!” Jupiter cried and banged on the door. “Are you there? Can you hear me? Open the door!”

It remained silent.

“Fellas,” Bob said, “the guys must have knocked over the shelves and maybe Mr Mason is lying underneath! We’ve got to get in there somehow!”

“Okay.” Pete looked up. “I’ll try to enter from the balcony and then open the front door for you. Give me a hand.”

“And how will you—” Bob began.

“—Can’t you see the window up there? Come on, move it!”

With united forces, Bob and Jupe lifted Pete up. He got hold of the grating of the balcony and pulled himself up.

“Can you get it open?” cried Bob.

“Yes, I think... Just a moment. Jupe, throw me the machete—but as far to the left as possible or it’ll hit me!”

“Great,” mumbled Jupiter. He weighed the machete in his hand, took momentum and threw it up. In an elegant arc it flew over the balcony, hit the wall of the house and fell down—unfortunately not on the balcony, but in the middle of a prickly, impenetrable thicket.

From above, they heard a sigh... then a loud smashing of glass.

“Pete?” cried Bob.

No answer.

“He’s in,” said Jupiter. “Let’s go!”

They ran back through the wilderness, out the side gate and then to the front door. There, however, they had to wait almost another three minutes before Pete finally opened the door for them. He was so pale as if he had seen a ghost.

“What’s wrong?” cried Bob. “Is Mr Mason there?”

“Somebody’s definitely here.” Pete took a step back and let them in. “Mr Mason is unconscious. Several boxes collapsed over him. I think...” He swallowed hard. “I think we should call an ambulance right away.”

A little later, the peaceful road was no longer peaceful. Three police cars, a fire engine and an ambulance were parked in front of Mr Shreber’s house with flashing lights on. Meanwhile, the police had barricaded the area with tape to hold back the curious residents. The firemen carried boxes and junk outside and threw them in an ever-growing pile to make room inside the house for the ambulance men with the stretcher.

Jupiter, Pete and Bob told Inspector Havilland of the Waterside Police Department what had happened.

“And you didn’t see or hear anyone?” asked the inspector.

“Not since we were here,” replied Jupiter.

“There was no one upstairs in the house either,” said Pete, “but it looks the same up there as it does down here—things were ripped off the shelves, boxes toppled over and so on.” He glanced quickly at the house and shivered. “Only there was nobody else underneath the shambles.”

“It won’t be any fun looking for fingerprints in this chaos,” murmured Havilland. “I’ll put two more men on the line to—hey! Leave that there!”

The Three Investigators turned around. An elderly man, who was about to pull a box from the mountain of junk, stepped back hastily and raised his hands. “It’s no big deal,” the man said. “The crazy old man is dead and you’ll probably throw all this stuff away anyway!”

“Please leave the decision to us.” Havilland waved a policeman over. “Make sure no one helps themselves there. I need a few specialists to look at that stuff, and—” He interrupted himself when two men came out of the house with a stretcher.

On the stretcher lay Mr Mason, who moved his head slightly and closed his eyes. Worried, The Three Investigators watched the men push the stretcher into the ambulance and enter. Then they drove off with the siren blaring.

“It’s good that you called us immediately,” Havilland said. “I’m going back to the police department now. And before you get any clever ideas, the house will be sealed. My colleague

Cotta has often praised you three and that you are really on the ball as you have just proved—but this is a case for the police.”

“That’s good,” said Jupiter. “Come on, fellas, we’re going home.”

They said goodbye to Inspector Havilland, climbed into the Beetle and drove off.

“That’s good?” Pete asked. “Since when are you so tame, Jupe? Do you really want to leave this case to the police?”

“The investigation of the assault on Mr Mason is of course left to the police,” Jupiter reasoned, “but I have a feeling that all these break-ins are connected. We just can’t explain that conclusively to Inspector Havilland at this stage.”

“I hope Mr Mason gets better soon,” Bob said anxiously and Pete nodded.

“I wonder...” Jupiter murmured and pinched his lower lip.

“What?” Pete asked.

“Why didn’t Mr Mason call the police first, but us?”

“Because you asked him to?” Pete surmised.

“That is illogical. If you hold a burglar, you don’t call three junior investigators, you call the police. He must have had some reason.” Jupiter sighed. “What about the lock? Did you find that suspicious?”

“What about it?” Pete said. “I said that it was very old-fashioned and it would take me some time to pick it.”

“Not that,” Jupe said, “but the fact that it was locked. The patio door was also locked. I did not get a good look at the doors from the inside, but if the burglars ran out one of the doors, would they bother to lock it?”

“Perhaps... perhaps not,” Bob remarked.

“Yeah, it’s not conclusive,” Jupe said. “Anyway, we have to take another look at the plane. We can’t get to the junk in Mr Shreber’s house now.”

They drove back to the salvage yard and Bob steered his car into the yard. Just as he turned off the engine, the three of them stared ahead.

“Please tell me that’s not true,” said Pete.

The aeroplane was gone!

As they stormed into the yard office, Uncle Titus looked up from his box of inventory cards. This was where he kept records of certain items he bought and sold.

“Ah, here you are,” he said. “What was the matter? You usually only run that fast when you don’t want your aunt to see you, Jupe.”

“Mr Mason has been attacked,” Jupiter replied succinctly. “Where is the plane?”

“Attacked? For goodness’ sake! Is he all right? Who attacked him?”

“We do not know yet. We called the police and he is now in hospital. Where is the plane?”

“Is he hurt?”

“Yes. Uncle Titus! Where is the plane?” Jupiter exclaimed.

“Can you ever say something other than ‘where is the plane’? Poor Mr Mason! I bet he never dreamed of this. You should visit him.”

“Yes, Uncle Titus. What did you do with it?”

“With what?”

“The plane!”

“Please don’t yell, Jupe,” Uncle Titus said gracefully. “There was a very interested customer. I wanted to tell you just now, but you couldn’t wait. Oh well, I know better than to

interrupt you in an emergency...”

“That cannot be true,” said Jupiter. “I just don’t believe it. You sold our plane before we could examine it properly?”

“First of all, we run a used goods trade here, not a museum. And second, have you noticed how huge that scrap heap is? I nearly bashed my skull on one of the wings twice this morning. If that had happened to a customer—”

“Who was the customer? What was his name?” Jupiter already reached for his uncle’s box of inventory cards—and faltered. For a moment, he looked at his uncle in a completely expressionless way and his uncle looked back without the slightest movement. Then they both started to grin.

“All right,” said Uncle Titus. “I admit defeat. How did you know?”

“I know you very well, Uncle Titus,” Jupe explained. “Every piece of junk that you acquire is gold to you. You wouldn’t have sold the plane off just like that. You would rather have it repaired and got more money out from it, right?”

“True,” Uncle Titus happily admitted.

“So where is it?” Jupe continued. “Why did you move it?”

“Well, look... your aunt did not like it right up front here,” Uncle Titus replied. “I got Jim to move it further in. The salvage yard is not that big. If you look around, you’ll find the plane. It’s much easier than an Easter egg hunt!”

Jupiter gave a moan. “All right. Come on, fellas!”

“Wait a minute,” Bob intervened. “What kind of interested customer was that? Do you have his name? Maybe he’ll buy the wreck at a later date.”

“I’m glad you asked that,” said Uncle Titus. “When he came this morning, he said he was interested to buy that plane but he wanted to inspect it first. I did not allow him as I said that it had to be cleaned and the rust removed first, but he wanted to check it out unchanged. Strange, isn’t it? Then he got pretty cheeky and I told him to come back next week, and he stormed off.”

Pete frowned. “That’s really funny. And what was his name?”

“He did not tell me his name. He was blond. I couldn’t get a good look at his face because he was wearing dark glasses and had a cap on... but I remember a scar—”

“Titus!” cried Aunt Mathilda from outside. “Where are you? Someone here wants to buy those sixteen old parasols!”

“I’m coming!” Uncle Titus cried and got up. “We’ll talk more later—after you go look for your Easter egg.”

8. A Piece of Paper

They found the 'Easter egg' at the back of the salvage yard, where it was well hidden between a scrap heap and the back fence. It could only be seen from the customer area if one specifically looked for something brown and khaki. Relieved, the three of them set out once again to search every corner of the wreck for further clues.

"We have at least four interested parties so far—five, if you count us," said Jupiter as he dived headlong into the cockpit. His muffled voice echoed through the plane. "Firstly, there was the guy who stole the box while we were looking at the plane. Then the two guys who ran into Mr Mason at the house. The police are now looking for them, so we should ask Inspector Havilland what happened. The third party is the night visitor at the salvage yard and the fourth is our interested customer. Of course, they could be all working together, but let's assume that half of Waterside wants something from this plane."

"And why should we assume that?" Bob loosened the door panel with a wrench and peeked behind it. "This only makes the case unnecessarily complicated!"

"Yes, but we can't ignore any possibility," Jupe said.

"And what will they find? What do we want to find anyway?" Bob asked. "I thought we were looking for something related to the mysterious number from the riddle."

"Maybe there is a treasure after all, like your diamonds, Jupe," said Pete, poking around in the fuselage. "Perhaps Mr Shreber won an insane amount of money playing poker and hid it somewhere in here."

"And he didn't just take this to the bank and leave it in his will to his heirs as it should be?" Jupiter questioned and wiped the sweat from his brow. "No, I don't think it's about money. If only we knew who or what Rashura is!"

"I could call Professor Meeker again," said Bob. "Maybe I can reach him now. I don't think we'll find anything more in this wreck anyway." He threw the wrench in the toolbox and headed for Headquarters.

After three steps, he almost collided with a man who suddenly appeared from behind a stack of pallets.

"Hey!" said the stranger curtly. "Can't you be careful?"

"Watch yourself." Bob tried to walk past him, but the man grabbed his arm. "Wait! Aren't you one of those three investigators?"

"Me?" Bob stopped and took a closer look at the man. He was tall and slim, about mid-fifties, wearing jeans and a black T-shirt. To protect him from the sun, he wore a faded cowboy hat. His arms were as muscular as if he had worked hard all his life, and his light-blue eyes looked sharply at Bob.

Bob pulled his arm away. "Why do you want to know?"

"I already know something," said the man. "I saw you earlier in front of old Shreber's house in Waterside. You were talking with a policeman."

"Fine... so?"

"What was going on in that house? Who was that man they carried out?"

"I'm sure it'll be in the papers tomorrow. Why are you asking me?"

“Because I am curious. Old Shreber was an acquaintance of mine. He dies and immediately all hell breaks loose around his house. And three well-known junior investigators stick their noses into things that don’t concern them.”

“This is just our hobby. Others play baseball or go skateboarding. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.” Bob took a step past him.

“And now you have the plane,” the man continued.

Bob stopped and turned around. “So it is...” he remarked, annoyed. Jupiter and Pete had stopped their search and were now curiously listening to the conversation.

“And you are looking for something in it...” the man continued.

“We’re just cleaning it.” Technically this was true. Obviously, Bob didn’t like this man at all. “Who are you, anyway? What do you want?”

Now the man pulled a humourless little grin on his face. “Call me Ishmael... and I can help you because I know what you should be looking for.” Ishmael! That’s the person named in Mr Shreber’s letter.

“Oh, yeah? And what would that be?” Bob continued.

“You are looking for a clue to a treasure,” Ishmael said, “and I can tell you where that clue is.”

“A treasure after all!” Pete whispered, but Jupiter only looked at the man sharply.

“Why would you do that?” Bob asked. “And how do you know where it is?”

“That’s not important.” The man pulled a card with a phone number out of his pocket and gave it to Bob. “What you’re looking for is a small piece of paper. Call me when you have found it.” He turned around and left.

Bob followed him at a distance to the main gate and then returned to Jupiter and Pete.

“Why did he leave all of a sudden?” Pete wondered.

“He said to call him once we have found the clue,” Bob replied.

“So he claims to be Ishmael,” Jupiter said, pinching his lower lip. “I bet that’s not his real name. It’s not a coincidence that ‘Ishmael’ is also a character in *Moby Dick*. I believe he’s playing a game with us and so we have to be careful. We have to find out more about this case before we involve him. Anyway, we now have his contact.”

“So he’s party number six,” said Pete. “Did I miss anything? Did anyone here hand out leaflets saying that the late Mr Shreber had hired The Three Investigators for some dubious purpose? Will we be doing autographs and press conferences in the near future?”

“I guess we’ll have to live with the fact that everyone knows,” said Jupiter. “Did you see where this Ishmael went, Bob?”

“To his car. Dusty grey Ford Mustang with Arizona plates—I noted it. Do you think he really knows anything?”

“We’ll find out soon.” Jupiter looked at the plane with renewed vigour. “A small piece of paper. It could be anywhere... or not. Wait.” He climbed back onto the wing and bent over the pilot seat.

“Attention,” hissed Pete. “Here comes another one!”

Jupiter and Bob turned around. A boy their age came towards them. He was blond and freckled, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and had a pair of aviator glasses on his head. He did not seem to realize that it looked pretty silly. He stopped at some distance, looked at the old plane and said to The Three Investigators grumpily: “So you’ve got it.”

“Yep,” Pete said challengingly. “What’s with it?”

The boy shrugged.

“You know this plane?” Jupiter asked.

“Sure I know it. Everyone in Waterside knows it.” He took a step closer. “Do you know what you’ve got here? It’s a Douglas A-1 Skyraider—a Navy warplane.” He got even closer to the plane and raised his hand like he was going to pat the rusty fuselage, but then he didn’t. “They were designed in the 1940s, but this one was built in 1957, making it one of the last to be built, but it was still in service until the early seventies. After that—”

“Good to know,” interrupted Bob, who had no desire at all to listen to a one-hour lecture on the aeroplane. “And who are you? What are you doing here?”

The boy shrugged his shoulders again. “Gerry. People on the street say you’re investigators, is that true?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Jupiter looked at Gerry critically. “So you know about planes? What a coincidence. How did you know it was here?”

“Everyone knows... After all, they hauled a huge crane through the city especially for this purpose. And then the truck transported this plane past my house.”

“I see. And what do you want from us?”

“I just wanted to look... and maybe help in case you don’t know your way around. I could warn you if you damage something.”

Pete threw a poisonous glance at him. “We’ll inspect it ourselves, thank you very much.”

“Yeah, sure, but then it could be too late! I can tell you how not to damage something!”

“Listen—” Bob began irritably.

Jupiter quickly interrupted him. “Okay, Gerry, how would you remove the pilot seat without damaging it?”

“Child’s play,” Gerry said immediately. “There’s a safety lever under the back of the seat. If you push it to the left, the seat can be removed very easily. It sits on two rails. Shall I show you—”

“No, that’s enough.” Jupiter bent over the seat, reached under it and fumbled around. “There’s a lever, but it’s really tight.”

“Shall I help you?”

“No, I can do this—” Jupiter insisted. His fingers had touched something that was neither dirt nor metal. It was a piece of paper!

Carefully Jupiter pulled it out and held it up. “Look at this, fellas!”

“So Ishmael was right!” cried Bob. “What is it?”

“Looks like an old receipt.” Jupiter climbed off the wing and the others flocked around him... including Gerry.

Before anyone got a good look at the piece of paper, Gerry snatched it out of Jupiter’s fingers and ran away.

“What? After him!” Jupiter shouted.

The Three Investigators stormed off—across the yard, out the gate, and there they saw Gerry jump on a moped, accelerate and race down the road.

“I’ll get him!” Pete ran to his MG. Bob followed him, but Jupiter turned around and ran to the Cold Gate. In no time he was in Headquarters, where he scribbled a few numbers on a notepad.

When he came back outside, Pete and Bob were no longer there.

“Step on it, Pete!” cried Bob.

“Yeah, what do you think I’m doing?”

“You’re going too slow! I could go faster with my Beetle!”

Pete did not appreciate that remark. The MG swept around a street corner with squealing tyres and wiped just past a hydrant. A hundred metres ahead of them was the moped. It lay dangerously low into a bend and disappeared.

Pete took a look at the speedometer. The MG could certainly go faster, but if he attempted it here, it wouldn't be just a traffic ticket he'd receive—he might lose his licence and even his car. But being a competent driver, he managed to at least manoeuvre around bends without losing much speed.

"Watch out," cried Bob, and Pete quickly pulled the MG to the right again. The truck coming towards them honked loudly and thundered past.

Now they were on the coastal road and Pete accelerated again. The moped could not go that fast. Metre by metre, the distance between them decreased. But suddenly Gerry took advantage of a gap in oncoming traffic, overtook a slow-moving vehicle and raced the moped up the mountain slope in a cloud of dust.

Pete slapped the steering wheel furiously with his hand. "Darn! I almost had him!"

"Let it go," Bob said. "Could you make out the licence plate number?"

"No, I didn't have time for that. Did you?"

"I may need new contact lenses. Couldn't see a thing." He sighed. "Jupe is going to be so mad. Let's go back."

9. Greetings from Rashura

“Let’s place an ad in the newspaper,” suggested Pete the next day when they met at Headquarters. “Famous investigators are looking for some treasure that they don’t even know what it is. Reward offered. Contact The Three Investigators for more information.”

“If anyone offered to help us, we don’t even know what to tell them.” Bob put his legs up and leaned back. “So far, we have nothing but a thousand suspects, incomprehensible clues and a couple of meaningless numbers. What have you figured out so far, Jupe?”

“It would be better if you didn’t keep interrupting...” Jupiter replied, annoyed.

“Are you saying that your super-brain can be influenced by our talking?” Pete asked.

“That piece of paper is a receipt,” said Jupiter, without going into the teasing. “It is very old and yellowed, and most of the print and writing are faded. The name of the shop begins with ‘M-A’. There is also a series of numbers... and something handwritten that I think was a name. But I didn’t have enough time to look at it closely...”

“A receipt, a number and a name.” Pete frowned. “Is it normal to write the customer’s name on a receipt? How does your uncle do it?”

“Not on a receipt,” Jupe explained. “But he keeps records in the form of inventory cards for regular customers... or if someone buys something very big or unusual... or when someone makes a reservation. But that receipt from the plane was so old that any time limit for enquiries should have expired by now.” Jupiter stared into space and knocked his teeth with a pen. “Now, what could be a name that begins with ‘M-A’... hmm... Man... Mam? No. Map. Mar... Marsden? Damn! If I only had a second more!”

“Give it up,” Pete said. “Even a mastermind is not infallible—otherwise you would be psychic and we could shut down our detective business.” He grinned, but then got serious again. “So there’s only one thing left to do. We’ve got to find Gerry again and get that receipt off him.”

“And what about our case?” Bob asked. “We’ve got to take care of that photograph!”

“But I find a treasure hunt much more exciting,” Pete replied. “And the competition is not sleeping, as you can see. If we tackle the photo now, someone else might find the treasure first!”

“I can’t shake the feeling that these two cases are connected.” Jupiter pushed himself off with one foot and slowly turned around on the chair. “Our problem is that we have too many leads at once.” He opened a text file on the computer and started typing. “Here’s what we have to do...”

1. Question Mr Mason in hospital.

2. What does ‘Cochin Big Blind 1972’ mean? What happened then?

3. Question Ishmael. Is there even a treasure or did he just say something to make us curious?

4. Find Gerry or the receipt.

5. Who or what is Rashura? If it is a person, what does he/she want?

6. Who were the burglars in Shreber’s house? Why did the first burglar deliberately steal a particular box?

7. Is there a connection between the photo and the treasure?

Jupiter stood up. "Let's ask Mr Mason about the treasure. Come on, fellas!"

They were greeted at Waterside Hospital by a visibly stricken Mr Mason. In his white pyjamas, he no longer looked as distinguished as before, but tired and weary. He had bruises and abrasions on his face, a bandage around his head and bandages around his right arm and leg.

"Nice of you to come," he said. "I still have to thank you. After all, you got me out of the mess."

"Not quite," replied Jupiter. "We only called the ambulance and the police because you were unconscious. Can you tell us exactly what happened and what the two burglars looked like?"

"I don't remember exactly, but I'll tell you what I've already told the police. I went into the house because I wanted to get some old files of Mr Shreber. In the living room, I surprised a young man who was trying to break open the desk. Since there was no escape route, he tried to squeeze past me. We wrestled with each other and I knocked him over. Then I called you. But then a second man came down from the upper floor and attacked me." The door opened and he interrupted himself.

A tall blonde nurse came in and handed him a small cup of reddish liquid. "Your medicine, Mr Mason," she said with an impersonal nurse's smile. "You must take it now."

Mr Mason frowned. "But I've already taken my pain killers."

"Please drink this now," said the nurse.

"All right." Mr Mason sighed, drank up the contents of the cup and gave it back to her. She nodded at The Three Investigators and went out.

Mr Mason continued: "I didn't stand a chance against both of them together. They overpowered me and pushed me against one of the shelves, and the boxes fell out and collapsed on me. You saw for yourself how shaky the shelves were. I could still hear someone shouting something that sounded like 'Greetings from Rashura'! Then everything went black. The next thing I knew, I woke up here."

"Greetings from Rashura?" Pete repeated anxiously.

"Yes. I heard it, and I don't like it either."

"What did the two men look like?" Jupiter asked.

"Caucasian, approximately early or mid-thirties... and they wore all black—trousers, shoes, shirts—everything black. And there was something else..." He closed his eyes. "I don't know what it was. I can't remember. I feel so strange. I... What..." He fell silent.

"Mr Mason?" asked Jupiter.

The secretary did not react.

"Mr Mason!" Bob touched the man on the shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Mr Mason's head tilted to the side.

"He's out cold!" Pete rushed to the door and ripped it open. "Nurse, quick! Something is wrong here! We need help immediately!"

Nurses and orderlies ran in from all directions. The Three Investigators were shooed out of the room and then they heard nothing for a few anxious moments. Restlessly, they paced back and forth in the corridor, and just when Pete couldn't stand it any longer and wanted to listen at the door, it was ripped open from the inside. The orderlies pushed the bed with Mr Mason past the three boys.

"Wait!" cried Jupiter. "What is the matter? Where are you taking him?"

“Intensive care unit. Out of the way!” one of the men exclaimed.

The group rushed off with the unconscious man and left The Three Investigators standing there. They stared at each other in horror.

Then Bob said with a pale face: “He was fine until that nurse gave him the medicine. And I, the fool, wondered why she wore gloves!”

“What are we waiting for?” cried Pete. “Maybe we can still look for her!”

But Jupiter held him back. “No, wait! It’s more important that we tell the doctors that he was poisoned!”

They ran to the intensive care unit and were stopped at the entrance by the nurse on duty. “Hold on there! Who are you? Where are you going?”

“A patient has just been brought up here,” Jupiter came out breathlessly. “Frank Mason. He has been poisoned—tell the doctors!”

“Excuse me?” The nurse tightened her brows. “What makes you think so?”

“A fake nurse gave him something to drink while we were with him. He was fine before that, but then he suddenly lost consciousness. Hurry up!”

“For goodness’ sake!” The nurse hurried away.

Shortly afterwards, The Three Investigators answered questions from Waterside police for the second time in two days. They described the fake nurse, explained what they had wanted from Mr Mason and finally learned that he was still unconscious but out of danger. No one knew when he would wake up.

“You reacted very quickly and thoughtfully—well done!” said the doctor who brought them the news. “Mr Mason will be in intensive care for a while. By the way, who are you three? Are you relatives of Mr Mason?”

“No, we’re not,” Pete said. “We’re Boy Scouts, so this was just our good deed for the week.”

“Can you tell us what kind of poison it was?” Bob asked.

“Yes, it was a very strong sedative, and with such a high dose in elderly people or people with circulatory problems is like poisoning and can easily cause fatality.”

“Thank you,” Jupiter said and turned to the policeman. “Can we go now?”

“Yes,” the policeman said. “If we have any questions, we’ll contact you in Rocky Beach.”

The Three Investigators left the hospital and went to Bob’s Beetle, which was in the car park.

“That was a nasty business,” Bob said. “Why on earth would anyone want to harm Mr Mason? Who did he hurt?”

“Look,” Pete said instead of an answer and pointed to the Beetle. A piece of paper was stuck under the wiper. The Three Investigators ran to the car and Bob unfolded the piece of paper. On it was written in handwritten block letters:

STAY OUT OF THIS.

RASHURA

10. Hurricane Jim

“What is this now?” Pete asked on the return journey. “A scavenger hunt, a treasure hunt, a murder attempt or all of them together? Did these people poison Mr Mason just to scare us off? Or has he done anything besides being Mr Shreber’s secretary and administrator of his estate?”

“It seems more like a tragic fate than a crime,” Bob said. “First he has this house full of rubbish to handle, then he is overpowered by burglars, and now they are trying to poison him. So, if I were Mr Mason, I’d tell the heirs to find another sucker for the job.”

“We must find out who or what Rashura is,” said Jupiter. “Apparently it is not an individual. The blonde nurse and the two burglars somehow belong together.”

“Maybe it’s a cult,” Pete pondered. “Mr Shreber committed some crime in 1972 and put himself under an eternal curse. And now this curse is also infecting the people around him. I think we should get out.”

“Are you serious?” Bob asked.

“No, but as soon as a situation gets dangerous, I always say we should get out,” Pete said. “And since you should agree with me, only for Jupe to democratically overrule both of us, we can move on to the next question immediately... What do we do now?”

“We’ll go back to Headquarters and review our list of things to do,” said Jupiter. “Off hand, I think we should contact Ishmael.”

They drove back through the mountains to Rocky Beach and Bob steered the Beetle into the entrance of the salvage yard.

“Watch out!” cried Pete.

Bob stepped fully on the brakes. The Beetle came to a halt—just in front of a forklift truck’s lifting arms, which almost impaled it.

Jim bent out of the cab, red with rage, and yelled: “Are you crazy? What is this? What are you doing driving in here?”

“To park!” Bob yelled back, stunned. “We always park here!”

“We’ll see about that!” Jim stared at him angrily, turned off the engine, got out and marched to the yard office.

Immediately after that, Uncle Titus came out, walked towards the Beetle and almost furtively bent down to Bob. He did not look particularly happy. “Uh listen,” he began, “maybe it’s really better if you park outside. Here in the yard, it’s so easy for something to fall over or bump into your car during transport...”

“But we always parked our cars here and nothing ever happened!” protested Bob.

“I know,” said Uncle Titus uneasily. “But Jim has a point—if something happens, I’ll get in trouble with the insurance company. Besides, he’s new... I’m sure we can work something out later.”

“All right, Uncle Titus,” Jupiter said. “Come on, Bob, there’s plenty of room outside.”

Annoyed, Bob put his car in reverse and drove out of the yard. Before they turned the corner, The Three Investigators saw Jim get back into the forklift with a satisfied grin on his face.

“Fellas, I don’t like this,” said Jupiter.

“Me neither,” Pete said. “He’s acting as if we have no business being around here!”

Bob parked his car next to front fence of the salvage yard. It was a wonderfully painted fence decorated by several artists of Rocky Beach. It featured a stormy ocean scene with a sailing ship foundering amid mountainous waves. In the foreground was a curious fish poking its head up from the sea to watch the ship. Jupiter pushed on the eye of the fish and several boards swung up to reveal another secret entrance to the salvage yard. This was Green Gate One. One by one, The Three Investigators slipped through the opening and let the boards swing shut behind them. From there, they crawled into Tunnel Two which led them all the way into Headquarters.

Jupiter took three cans of soda from the fridge, distributed them and sat down at the table. “We will take point three on the list and call Ishmael,” he said. “He seems to be the only one who really knows anything. And we should find out what it is and why he intends to help us.”

Just as Jupiter reached for the phone, they heard an extremely loud rumble just outside. It was like a huge load of junk came crashing down close to their trailer. Jupe immediately pulled down a pipe attached to the ceiling. That was ‘See-All’, a periscope which they had constructed using mirrors and stove pipes that protruded out from the roof of the trailer so that they could look around the entire salvage yard without being seen, just like in a submarine. The original periscope had broken some time ago, but the salvage yard had supplied enough spare parts for a new one. As long as The Three Investigators could not afford a webcam, it was useful enough.

“I don’t believe it!” cried Jupiter in indignation.

“Wh—what happened?” Bob asked.

“Jim just dumped a huge load of junk in front of the Cold Gate!” Jupe exclaimed. “Come on, let’s get him!”

The Three Investigators went through Tunnel Two and Green Gate One to the street and then ran back into the salvage yard through the main gate. Jim was about to dump another load of old pallets across the Cold Gate with the forklift truck. The three of them ran up to him, and when he had unloaded the pallets, Jupiter got in his way.

Jim braked abruptly. “What is this? Do you want to get run over? Get out of my way!”

“Why are you putting all these junk on our pile of scrap metal here,” Jupiter said angrily. “Didn’t my uncle tell you that this scrap heap is ours?”

“Look here, wise guy,” Jim replied angrily. “This is a junkyard, and this is a pile of junk. What’s the big deal if I load more junk here? I’m just clearing this out from the other side of the yard to make more space for other stuff. You kids should not be hanging around here.”

“That is none of your business,” said Jupiter, who was now finally fuming in rage. “I happen to live here—this is my home. This scrap heap belong in our area where you have no business encroaching into!”

“What am I doing arguing with a snotty kid like you?” Jim said contemptuously. “Apparently your uncle has to explain to you the difference between a work site and a playground.” He climbed out of the forklift and marched to the yard office again.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Pete.

“Come,” said Jupiter. “Let’s go back into Headquarters before this guy comes back and I lose my temper again!”

The Three Investigators went back out to the street to Green Gate One and made their way back into their trailer.

Inside Headquarters, the three of them threw themselves into their armchairs.

“The crisis meeting is on. Theme—Jim Cooper,” Jupe announced. “If he keeps this up, by next week, this trailer will be compressed into a handy cube of scrap metal.”

“For that, he must first find our place here,” Bob said.

“He probably has already found it,” Jupe said. “If he had found his way into our open-air workshop, he would have seen parts of this trailer.”

“At least we have our mountain of scrap metal camouflage,” said Pete. “That makes things a bit more difficult for him. But Jupe, your uncle will surely stop him. He can’t sweep through here like a hurricane and ruin everything we’ve built up!”

“I could slap myself that I had advised my uncle to hire a new helper,” said Jupiter. “But who would have guessed that this guy is about to roll across the yard like a bulldozer and level everything? I just hope Uncle Titus doesn’t let him do whatever he wants to do...”

“If we can take on cultists, movie stars, master thieves and criminals, we can surely deal with a yard helper!” Pete said vengefully.

“I agree,” said Jupiter. “All right. Let’s get back to our case. Give me Ishmael’s phone number, Bob.”

Bob slipped him Ishmael’s card and Jupiter switched on the loudspeaker so that Pete and Bob could listen in before he dialled the number.

It rang three times. Then a male voice answered. “Yes?”

“Mr Ishmael?” asked Jupiter.

After a brief pause, the man said: “Yes... you’re one of The Three Investigators, right?”

“Yes, my name is Jupiter Jones. You had—”

“So you found the piece of paper?” Ishmael interrupted.

Jupiter frowned. “Yes. And we have a few questions about that.”

“Why? If you have that note, you would know what to do.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that, Mr Ishmael. Do you happen to know a boy called Gerry?”

“Should I know him?”

“That depends on how important the note is to this case. That boy stole it from us.”

There was a pause before the man said without the slightest hint of anger or amazement: “Well, that’s your bad luck then.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll find him. But I have one question. How did you know about the note?”

“That is not important. After all, you don’t have it anymore.” With that, he hung up.

The Three Investigators looked at each other in amazement. “What was that?” Bob asked. “First he tipped us off to look for a piece of paper, and now he doesn’t care?”

Another loud rumble from outside made all three flinch. “The noise is just outside again!” cried Bob. “What is going on now?”

Pete jumped up and took a look through ‘See-All’. And there he saw Jim in the process of removing the pile of old pallets away from the Cold Gate. He could even see that Jim’s face was distorted in rage.

Grinning, Pete turned to his friends. “Although round one went to Hurricane Jim for banishing our cars, but round two clearly goes to Titus Jones and The Three Investigators!”

11. Taylor

The next day, Jupiter, Pete and Bob stayed away from Jim to avoid getting into another confrontation. While Jim was operating the circular saw, the noise was unbearable, so the three of them decided to clean up and remove the rust from the plane. They fetched a bucket of water and several sponges and cleaned the cockpit—until Jim came and wordlessly took their bucket away.

“Hey!” cried Jupiter angrily. “What are you doing?”

“I need the bucket,” Jim mumbled. “Get yourself another one.”

The Three Investigators sat down next to the plane and held a war council.

“We have three options,” said Pete. “We could put up with everything and hope that at some point it will stop on its own... or we go to your uncle and ask him to talk to Jim... or we strike back. I vote for option three. This guy is way too much!”

“There is another possibility you have overlooked,” said Jupiter. “We could talk to Jim ourselves... and we should do just that. Let’s go!”

They climbed down from the plane and went up to Jim at the circular saw. The water bucket was there—empty and unused.

“Jim!” cried Jupiter loudly to drown out noise from the circular saw. “We want to talk to you!”

Jim pretended not to hear and pushed another piece of sheet metal under the saw. With deafening screeches, it ate its way through the metal.

“Jim!”

He pushed in another piece of sheet metal.

“Jim, now listen to me—”

Jim switched off the circular saw.

“Hey!” Jupiter roared into silence.

Jim turned to The Three Investigators and examined them coldly. “You have no business here. Go back to your playground.”

“What do you actually want to achieve?” asked Jupiter.

“Achieve? I just want to do my work in peace.”

“And do you have to harass us to do it?”

“Did I bully you little boys?” scoffed Jim. “Did I take away your toys? Boo-hoo, I’m gonna cry. Now get out of here.”

“Mr Cooper, I hate to repeat this, but I live here. You are a probationary employee. At the end of the day, I have the upper hand.”

“So be it...” Jim rebuked him. “As soon as something doesn’t suit the spoiled high school brat, he talks big. Go ahead! Run to your uncle and take cover! I don’t give a nickel for your threats, you little runt.”

“I just wanted to make it clear to you that there is no sense in working against each other. As an adult, you should know that.” Jupiter’s last words were drowned in the screeching of the saw. Jim turned his back on The Three Investigators and ignored them.

“That was very successful,” said Pete as they walked back across the yard. “Now what?”

“Now the battle lines are clear,” said Jupiter. “He has the choice of behaving like an adult—or like a large-sized Skinny Norris. We will react accordingly.”

“Honestly—I’d rather have the real Skinny Norris right now,” Bob said. “At least he could be chased off the yard.”

“Speaking of which,” said Pete, “what are the police doing here?” He pointed ahead to the main gate.

A police car had just stopped there and a man in civilian clothes got out from the passenger side. The driver remained in the car. The man looked around, mustered what he could see from where he was standing and then approached The Three Investigators.

“Jupiter Jones, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews?”

“Yes,” said Jupiter. “I am Jupiter Jones. What can we do for you?”

The man fleetingly showed a police badge. “Taylor, Waterside Police Department. I must ask you to turn over to me all documents from Mr Shreber relating to an organization called Rashura.”

“Why?”

“There are suspicions that this organization is responsible for the poison attack on Frank Mason. Withholding evidence is a serious criminal offence and can be charged with up to—”

“We are not holding anything,” Jupiter interrupted. “How is Mr Mason?”

“As well as can be expected under the circumstances. The documents, please.”

“I’ll get them,” Pete offered, but Jupiter stopped him. “Wait, Pete! I’ll do it.”

He disappeared behind the pile of scrap metal and came back with the envelope a short time later. “This is all we have. We checked the envelope for fingerprints, but there were only —”

“Thank you,” Taylor said and virtually tore the envelope from his hand. He opened it and took a quick look inside. “Okay, we will investigate it ourselves. Have a nice day.”

“Don’t you want to know what we found out?” Bob asked.

“It’s probably hard to believe, but we have some people on the force who are almost as smart as you are.” Taylor turned around and went back to the car. The driver started the engine, Taylor got in and they drove off with squealing tyres.

“They’re in a hurry,” Bob said. “What a bummer.”

Jupiter pinched his lower lip and looked thoughtful. “Don’t you find that strange?” he asked. “How do the police know about Rashura? We haven’t told them anything about it.”

“The police just have more contacts than we do,” Bob said. “But why did you just give them the photo?”

Jupiter grinned. “No, Bob. I just gave him the photocopy, only the front, but not the back with the words. The original photo is still at Headquarters. We can make more copies and scan it for safekeeping.”

Pete laughed. “Great! I guess it always pays to be careful.”

“Anyway, we now know that Rashura is an organization and not an individual,” Bob continued.

Jupiter nodded, but didn’t look convinced. Then he shrugged his shoulders. “There’s nothing we can do about it at the moment. By the way, we have another bucket behind the storeroom.”

“Hooray,” mumbled Bob.

They were just making their way to the storeroom when sirens sounded in the distance and approached quickly. A short time later, a police car with flashing lights sped past the salvage yard entrance. It almost never happened in this peaceful part of Rocky Beach. The

Three Investigators ran to the driveway, but the car had already disappeared. The siren wailing went away and was soon no longer audible.

So they fetched the second bucket, cleaned the plane for a while and then returned to Headquarters.

"Let's try to find Gerry," Jupiter said. "He said that the truck with the plane went past his house. Let's assume optimistically that he wasn't lying. We don't know the boy, and he doesn't live in Rocky Beach. So he lives somewhere on the road between us and Mr Shreber's house in Waterside. If we exclude all roads that are too narrow for a truck, we should be able to narrow down the area in question."

Jupiter turned on the computer, opened a road directory program and printed out a section of the area between Rocky Beach and Waterside. Together they worked until they had marked the most likely route for the truck.

"There are only a few houses on the road through the mountains," Pete said. "Let's start there! Maybe we'll get lucky."

But they had no luck. In scorching heat, they drove up the mountain and rang the bell at every single house that could be seen from the road. Everywhere they asked for a boy named Gerry, but no one knew him.

"Do you remember a truck with a rusty old plane going by here a few days ago?"

"Yes, of course, what an ugly old thing!" said an elderly man sitting at his patio.

But at the entrance to Waterside, the answers were different. In the ten houses along the route, no one had seen a truck with an aeroplane.

"I just remember the darn construction site," said a housewife who was busy watering her hibiscus bushes. "For a whole week, there was nothing but noise, dirt and dust, and it was unbearable! Finally the workmen completed their work yesterday."

"Was there a diversion during this time?" Jupiter asked.

"I think so. Try Steephill Road, which goes around the mountain on the other side."

"Thank you very much, ma'am," said Jupiter. "Come on, fellas!"

But nobody had seen a truck on Steephill Road, and there was no boy called Gerry there either.

"Maybe it's not his real name," Bob said as they sat back in the car. "I guess every word he said was a lie anyway."

"I would be interested to know how he knew about the note," Pete said.

"Maybe he didn't know." Jupiter mumbled and pinched his lower lip. "It's possible that he just wanted to play a stupid trick on us. The question is, why?"

"He's probably another copy of Skinny Norris," Bob said and started his car.

"Apparently, everything is working against us right now."

"Maybe not," Jupiter suddenly said. "That over there could help us!" He pointed to a knee-high wall that surrounded one of the properties. At one point, three of the uppermost stones had broken off, as if something had struck it with great force.

They got out again and took a closer look at the place. "Black traces of paint," Bob said. "The truck was black!"

"And it was heavy enough to mow down everything here." Pete looked around. "The truck went through that small road!"

Jupiter took a look at his plan. "Stanton Road. It is narrow, but leads back to the mountain road. Apparently he couldn't get any further here, maybe because of parked cars, and then he tried to go through Stanton Road. Let's have a look."

“We should have taken note of the transport company,” Bob said. “Then we could have located the driver who could then tell us that!”

“Oh well, we’ll figure something out,” Jupe urged. “Come on!”

They marched along the road and harassed the residents. Yes, everyone remembered the black monster that had squeezed through here. The driver had cursed so loudly that they could hear him over the roaring engine... and he was obviously crazy. What normal person would ever drive a wrecked plane through a residential area?

The sixth house was a villa, which stood at a short distance from the road behind a high hedge. A paved driveway led right up to the door. Jupiter rang the bell. After a while, the door opened—and in front of them stood Gerry with an almost completely swollen black eye.

“You! How did you find me?” he exclaimed.

“Routine work,” Jupiter said and pushed him backwards into the house. “We want to talk to you and we want the piece of paper... and since you ask so nicely, yes, we would love something cold to drink.”

At that moment, the mobile phone rang in Pete’s pocket. He pulled it out and answered it. “The Three Investigators. Pete Crenshaw speaking.”

“Hello, Pete,” said the voice of Inspector Cotta. “Are you by any chance in the vicinity and could you come to the police department?”

“Uh, no,” Pete said. “We are around in the mountains. What is it?”

“It’s about a police car that stopped just outside the salvage yard this afternoon. Have you seen it?”

“Yes, of course. A policeman wanted to see us.”

“Oh, really?” said Cotta sharply. “What did he want?”

“Mr Shreber’s documents. It was related to the poison attack on Mr Mason. Rashura has ___”

“Hold on, not so fast. Shreber, Mason, Rashura, well... Did the policeman say what precinct he was from?”

“We only talked to one, the other stayed in the car. He said that he came from Waterside. That’s where the hospital is, where Mr Mason is.”

“Fine, thank you. Do you happen to know the policeman’s name?”

“Taylor. Why, what—”

“Can you describe this Taylor guy?”

“I think so. Early forties, slim, dark hair, a dimple on his chin, wore plain clothes... Why? Is something wrong?”

“You could say that,” said Cotta. “The police car was stolen this morning from the car park of a taco bar while the officers were getting breakfast. That Taylor is a fraud. Thank you, Pete. I’ll be in touch.” Cotta hung up.

12. Gerry

“No matter what it was—it wasn’t me,” Gerry said immediately, even before Pete had given a word of explanation.

“You’re not in your early forties and you don’t have a dimple on your chin,” Bob said sarcastically. “Can we have a drink or not?”

“I didn’t invite you.”

“You owe us. Go on, get our drinks,” Jupiter said and then turned to Pete. “Was that who I think it was?”

“Yes, Inspector Cotta.” Pete scowled and felt gloomy. “The policemen were fakes, and the police car was stolen this morning.”

“What?” Bob exclaimed in astonishment.

“Aha!” said Jupiter triumphantly. “So I was right after all—it was the two burglars that Mr Mason confronted in Mr Shreber’s house! That Taylor immediately seemed suspicious to me.”

“Imagine stealing a police car—that’s really bold!” Pete remarked.

“No bolder than to poison a man in front of three eyewitnesses,” said Jupiter. “These people are either ruthless or desperate—or quite sure that nobody can find them... but they have to watch out because we will get them!”

Gerry came back from the kitchen with three cans of lemonade. “Here. What happened?”

“Nothing.” Jupiter grabbed a can and opened it.

“Hey, wait a minute. You want something from me, right? Then I want to be informed too! That’s business!”

“Wrong,” Bob said. “You stole something from us and we want it back. That’s the only business here.”

“I didn’t steal anything from you...” Gerry replied, “because that note is mine.”

Pete raised one eyebrow. “Yours? Why?”

“Because Harry Shreber was my grandfather! The house and all the junk and the plane and the note now belong to my parents. And so, it belongs to me too.”

Stunned, The Three Investigators stared at him. Jupiter drank his can empty and put it on the table. “Interesting. I suggest we sit down somewhere and discuss the matter in peace. Where is your room?”

Gerry pressed his lips together, but finally gave way. “That way.”

He led them up the stairs. His room revealed that he had not lied, at least not about his enthusiasm for aeroplanes. Posters and construction plans of old military aircraft hung on the walls, model planes were on the desk and on the shelf, and a quick glance at the bookshelf told The Three Investigators that he apparently had no other hobby.

Gerry sat down on his chair. “Sit down where there’s room.” Since there were no other chairs in the room, The Three Investigators sat down on the bed.

“Now explain this,” Jupiter began. “So Miles Dempster is your father?”

Gerry nodded.

“You are really lucky,” Pete said ironically and Jupiter threw an angry look at him.

"Can we concentrate on the facts?" the First Investigator continued. "Gerry, Mr Mason had told us that the heirs were not interested in the house or the plane and just wanted to get rid of everything as quickly as possible. Is that true?"

Gerry pulled a face. "Yes, it is—as far as my parents are concerned. My father hadn't visited Grandpa for years because he found the house disgusting. And my mother only went because he was her father. But they always said that the only way to get rid of all that junk was to get rid of it as quickly as possible when Grandpa died. And I didn't want that, okay? I loved that house! I mean—who has a grandpa with a real aeroplane in his backyard?"

"Uh, yes," Pete said. "But that plane is junk!"

"It is not! And if my parents had allowed it, I would have put it in our garden! I was really mad when they told Mr Mason to sell it!"

"Well and good," Jupe said. "So you probably climbed around in that plane a lot more than once. However, since Mr Mason sold us the plane, technically, the note belongs to us."

Gerry shrugged his shoulders.

"If you knew about the note, why didn't you get it out earlier?" Bob asked. "Why did you wait until you had to take it from us?"

"I just didn't know," Gerry said sullenly. "Grandpa was always a little funny. He pretended he had a lot of secrets from his Navy days. He claimed he'd found a treasure, and now some secret organization was after him, and all that stuff. And he said the key to it was in that plane. I was always looking for it, of course, but I thought he meant a real key. I had no idea he meant that stupid piece of paper—if that's what he meant. How did you know it was there?"

"Someone told us," replied Jupiter. "But why didn't you just tell us this whole story when you came to the salvage yard? Why all the fuss?"

Gerry shrugged. "That's because all of this is none of your business."

"It's our business now," said Jupiter. "Your grandfather hired us to settle an issue. Didn't your father tell you that?"

"No. He never tells me anything. What were you supposed to do with the note?"

Jupiter ignored the question. "Does the name Ishmael mean anything to you?"

"Nope. I only know him from that movie *Moby Dick*."

"That movie was based on a book of the same name... by Herman Melville," Jupe said.

"Never mind. In any case, I don't know any other Ishmael. Was that the man who told you about the note?"

"Yes... and do you know the name Rashura?"

"No, never heard of it. Who's that?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does," Gerry said. "That's the name he—" he pointed to Pete, "—said when he was on the phone just now. I'm not completely stupid. This Rashura has something to do with a—wait a minute! Did you also say a poison attack? On Mr Mason? What happened?"

"You're a real lightning bolt," Pete teased him. "It's been half an hour since I said that."

Gerry ignored him. "Now tell me. What is going on? Is Mr Mason all right?"

"For the most part yes," replied Jupiter. "A fake nurse gave him a drug. Fortunately, the doctors found out very quickly what kind of drug it was and were able to give him an antidote."

"Wow," Gerry said. "That's bad. Why would anyone want to poison Mr Mason? He was just my grandpa's secretary! Does it have something to do with the treasure?"

"We don't know that." Jupiter felt it was absolutely unnecessary to acquaint Gerry with their previous findings. "To get back to the note. Give it to me, we'll copy down what's on it

and then you can have it back.”

“Sure, you’re only interested in that piece of paper,” Gerry said with a mocking grin. “Unfortunately, it’s too late now, because I don’t have it anymore. So there you go!”

The Three Investigators just looked at him. Gerry pulled a face. “Honestly! I mean, where do you think I got this shiner from? Some rascal took that note from me!”

Pete moaned and Bob slapped his flat hand in front of his forehead. But Jupiter bent over with interest. “Where and when?”

“The day before yesterday,” Gerry said. “Right after I got it from you, and after I lost you guys—that was cool, right?”

“Yes, insanely cool,” growled Pete.

Gerry grinned. “Well, I came home here after that. I was about to come in when a car stopped and a man got out. He must have followed me all the way. Anyway, he took the note from me and drove away, and that was it.”

“What did he look like?” Jupe asked.

“I don’t know. Just a man. Not that old, I guess.”

“Special features?”

“I didn’t see that. It happened so fast—”

“Clothing?”

“Just normal clothes.”

“And his car?”

“Some normal car, but I don’t know what model. I’m not into cars.”

“You’ll make a great detective,” Pete said sarcastically.

“Oh come on, you wouldn’t have been better off either! It all happened so fast! He came up to me, gave me the shiner and said I should forget that I had ever seen that note! I saw stars, but no special features!”

“Hmm...” Jupiter said. “I see you also have a scratch on your cheek. Does it hurt a lot?”

“Yeah, that was from his stupid ring. It burned like fire, I tell you.”

Jupiter nodded sympathetically. “Special features—wore a ring with at least one sharp edge.”

Gerry clipped. “Uh, okay. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“But nothing helps us,” said Bob. “Did you at least remember anything that was written on that note?”

Gerry shrugged. “Not much. It was a receipt from a pawn shop here in Waterside—Maruthers. I asked my mother about it. The shop closed down years ago.”

“And do you still have the number that was on the receipt?” Jupe asked.

“73-08-something—I can’t remember. There’s no point if the shop doesn’t exist anymore.”

“And you’re satisfied with that?” Jupiter raised an eyebrow. “Where was this pawn shop?”

“I’m telling you, the shop is closed!”

“Yes, you said that, but where was it before it closed?”

“Somewhere along the main street, but it’s no use.”

“Leave it to us and take care of your black eye.” Jupiter got up. “We’ll have a look around. Come on, fellas!”

In one of the old-established shops along the main street of Waterside, people still remembered the Maruthers pawn shop, and in a small bakery, an elderly saleswoman could

even tell The Three Investigators where the owner and his wife had lived.

Halfway up the hill, they found the name 'Maruthers' on the blue letterbox of a pretty little house overlooking the town to the south. It was a nice, homely house with yellow walls, a red roof and masses of flowering geraniums on all the window sills, and its appearance did not in the least prepare The Three Investigators for the nice white-haired lady who, after a short wait, opened the door and pointed a rifle at them.

"Good afternoon," she said graciously. "If you're here to rob me, I'd like to point out that I know how to use this toy here."

It took a moment for The Three Investigators to recover from the shock.

"Ma'am," said Jupiter hastily, "I assure you that we have no intention of robbing you!"

"Yes, that's what I would say in a situation like this. Save yourself the trouble. I was warned about you so you might as well leave before I call the police."

"Call the police? But we just want to ask you something!" Jupe exclaimed.

"I know that," said the old lady. "You claim to be investigators and you want to rummage through my late husband's files to find something very important. Fortunately, a real investigator was here last night, so I know. Good afternoon."

She took a step back and tried to close the door. In a flash, Jupiter pushed his foot in between. "Wait! Please!"

"Young man," the old lady calmly said. "One more step and I'll shoot."

"No! Please—just wait!" Jupiter said. "We don't want to go inside. We just want to talk to you."

"And while you three are distracting me here at the door, your accomplices are breaking in at the patio door. Do you think I'm senile enough to fall for that?"

"Mrs Maruthers," Jupiter said, "believe me, we really are investigators. If you allow me to reach into my pocket, I can show you our card." He carefully took out one card and handed it to the old woman.

Mrs Maruthers took the card and looked briefly at it. "You can fake something like that," Mrs Maruthers said, unimpressed.

"Then call the police in Rocky Beach. Talk to Inspector Cotta and ask for Jupiter Jones, Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews. We are not lying."

"Hmm..." said Mrs Maruthers. "Get your foot out the door."

Jupiter did it and she closed the door and put the security chain on.

While they waited, Pete said: "Someone warned her about us?"

"Supposedly a 'real' investigator too," Bob said gloomily. "If I have to guess, he has a dimple on his chin, wears a sharp-edged ring and signs his warning messages with 'Rashura'. Fellas, we are definitely too late."

Jupiter said nothing and just pinched his lower lip.

After some time, the door opened. This time Mrs Maruthers had no rifle in her hand. "That was a nice policeman for once," she said. "He confirmed that you are investigators. And to be on the safe side, I want you to give me the name of a master thief—"

"Hugenay," Pete said immediately. "So you believe us now?"

"Yes, and I'm very sorry that I suspected you. You have to be careful nowadays, but I'm afraid I was careless at the wrong moment. So this Mr Taylor was not a real investigator? I even gave him a piece of cake..."

"So he was in the house?" Jupiter asked. "Did he show you an old receipt?"

"Yes," said Mrs Maruthers with grief. "Gee, if only I'd known he was a fraud! Then, of course, I wouldn't have given him the address!"

"What address?" asked Jupiter. "Wasn't he trying to locate a certain item?"

“Of course,” said the old lady. “But when I closed the pawn shop after the death of my husband, I wrote to all our customers to collect their valuables. Some of them did not contact me because they had moved or had died or perhaps because they were uncomfortable being reminded of the pawned item. And so after a few years, I sold everything, including the watch.”

“A watch then,” said Jupiter. “That is at least something. What kind of watch was it?”

“A pilot’s watch. It was such an ugly chunky thing with tons of displays that no one needs unless they are speeding through the Earth’s orbit. But it was very valuable, so I sold it to a collector. So what is so special about this watch that everyone wants to have it?”

“We don’t know that yet,” said Jupiter. “But it is strange that Mr Shreber never picked it up. He must have received your letter as he only died a few weeks ago.”

“Shreber?” asked Mrs Maruthers in surprise. “How did you come up with Mr Shreber?”

“Well, he pawned the watch at your shop, didn’t he.”

“Pardon? No, no. We never received a watch from Mr Shreber. The customer’s name was Fisher. Are we even talking about the same watch?”

“If the receipt started with the number 73-08...”

Mrs Maruthers got up and walked to a chest of drawers. There she took out a record book and flipped through it.

“Yes, 73-08-63... That’s right, that the receipt number. But what does Mr Shreber have to do with this?”

“He had the receipt,” Jupe said.

“Oh, yes.” The old lady gave Jupe a long, strange look, seemed to consider whether she should say anything else, but then she kept quiet. Now she no longer looked suspicious or angry, but depressed.

“We’ll find out what that means,” Bob promised. “So you gave Mr Taylor this collector’s address?”

“Yes, how stupid of me!”

“Do not blame yourself,” Pete added. “You couldn’t have known.”

“No, but since I’m always preaching about how careful you have to be nowadays, I look pretty stupid now,” said the old lady resolutely.

“Could you give us the name and address of the collector?” Jupiter asked.

“Yes, of course. It’s in another record book. Excuse me a moment.” And she closed the door again.

Pete growled. “She offers cake to a cheat, but leaves us at the door. Just what we need in this monkey heat.”

“I guess she’s a little confused,” Bob said. “Look on the bright side—a minute ago, she was wanting to shoot us.”

“Thanks, that saves my day,” Pete remarked. “Jupe, what is it? What are you pondering about?”

“I’m not pondering, I’m impatient. How long does it take to write down an address? I have the feeling that we have to hurry up if we don’t want Rashura to get too far ahead of us. They have a huge head start.”

It took another five minutes before the door finally opened again. Instead of apologizing, Mrs Maruthers looked at all three of them and asked: “Do you smoke?”

“No,” Jupiter replied astonished. “Why?”

“Because Mr Sapchevsky lives up in the mountains where it is very dry. There, a burning cigarette butt is enough to set everything on fire. We’ve just had another warning on TV.”

“Don’t worry,” said Jupiter. “We gave up smoking many years ago.”

“Don’t joke about that,” said Mrs Maruthers sternly. “Here is the address. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I have chores to do. Goodbye!”

13. A Visit to the Police Department

The Three Investigators politely said goodbye to the old lady and walked towards the car.

Jupiter took a look at the address. "Hmm... Kagel Canyon. That's quite a distance up the hills. We'll have to hurry if we want to be back down before dark. So—"

Pete's mobile phone rang. He took it out of his pocket. "The Three Investigators. Pete Crenshaw speaking... Ah, Inspector Havilland! ... How? ... Yes, we're in the area... We—yes, he's here. Just a moment." He passed the phone to Jupiter. "He wants to talk to you."

Jupiter answered.

"Hello, Jupiter," said the inspector. "I hear you are in Waterside right now? Then please come by here at the police department at Truman Road."

"What's it all about? We're in a bit of a hurry right now—"

"We have arrested someone who denies having stolen a box full of valuables from Mr Shreber's house. As Mr Mason is indisposed at the moment, I need you to identify him."

"All right, Inspector, we'll be right there." Jupiter ended the call and handed the mobile phone back to Pete. "I'm supposed to identify a burglar—now of all times! But if we hurry, we can still make it. Let's go."

They ran to the car and got in. Truman Road was easy to find but at this time, there was traffic congestion in Waterside and soon, The Three Investigators were stuck and could not move forward. Then an old man in a cowboy hat parked his Land Rover so awkwardly that it blocked the entire road. Next, a woman dropped her full shopping bag in the middle of the road, and while helpful passers-by helped her pick it up, the traffic jammed again and Jupiter flew into a rage.

"I'm getting out," he announced. "I'll be there faster on foot!" And he was already outside and started running.

But he did not run for long. Waterside had a very misleading name, for it was by no means by the sea, but in the middle of the mountains. And so there was not the slightest cool breeze, but only the hot, dusty wind that blew in from the desert as if it was from an oven. After a hundred metres, Jupiter's T-shirt was sticking to his body and he could hardly breathe. Although he was now more athletic than he had been a few years ago, he was far from being able to perform athletic feats like running a hundred and fifty metres. So he walked in a brisk pace until he reached the police department.

There he was made to wait for ten minutes before being led to Inspector Havilland. Unlike his colleague Cotta in Rocky Beach, Havilland had an impeccably tidy office and there were no posters of Humphrey Bogart and other movie stars of yesteryear on the wall, but various diplomas, awards and family photos.

"Ah, Jupiter," the inspector greeted him. "Sit down. Where have you left your colleagues?"

"In a traffic jam." Jupiter sat down on the visitor's chair. During the waiting time, he had thought about getting as much information as possible out of Havilland if he had to waste his time here. So he came straight to the point. "I have something to tell you about Rashura."

"About whom?"

"Rashura."

“Who is that?”

“We do not know yet. But it is the people who broke into Mr Shreber’s house and hurt Mr Mason. And they are probably also behind the attempt to poison him. How is he?”

“Unchanged.” Havilland frowned and wrote down the name. “Rashura.”

“It sounds like an Indian name,” Jupe added. “But we haven’t found out what it refers to.”

“Why Indian?”

“Because Mr Shreber was sent a strange photo over and over again in the last few years, and that seemed to worry him very much. Apparently the photo had to do with an event which is called ‘Cochin Big Blind’ that took place in 1972. Cochin is an Indian port city now known as Kochi. There is also something else written on the photo in what is probably an Indian script, but we have not yet found out what it means.”

Havilland raised his brows. “I’d like to see that photo.”

“I have it at home, but I can send you a copy by e-mail. A man named Taylor, who together with an accomplice, stole a police car and pretended to be a policeman. He wanted to take it from us, but I only gave him a photocopy.”

“Rashura, Cochin Big Blind, 1972, Taylor. That’s something,” Havilland said. “Can you describe this Taylor guy?”

“Yes, of course. He was about forty years old and slim. Brown eyes and dark brown hair, which he had cut militarily short. He wore black clothes and had a noticeable dimple on his chin. He also wore a ring with a small spike on his right ring finger. That is how I could tell he was not a real policeman. No policeman in the world would wear a ring like that when on duty.”

Havilland smiled appreciatively. “I’d like to hear such detailed descriptions more often.” He wrote everything down, called an officer in and gave him the description. “We’ll put out an APB on this man... and send in Sergeant Madhu.”

“Yes, Inspector,” the policeman said and left.

Jupiter writhed in his chair.

“Is something wrong?” Havilland asked.

“Well... will it be much longer? My colleagues and I are pursuing a lead...”

Havilland suppressed another smile. “Then, of course, I won’t keep you.” He looked up as a uniformed policeman walked in. The man was black-haired and dark-skinned and he looked at Jupiter with dark eyes.

“Madhu,” Havilland said. “You are from India, right? Do you know a name or word called ‘Rashura’?”

The policeman turned away from Jupiter and looked at Havilland. “No, sir. I never heard of that word.”

“Pity,” Havilland said, “that would have been too easy. Thank you, you may go.”

Before Madhu went outside, he glanced at Jupiter with a look that made the First Investigator shiver despite the heat. This policeman did not seem to like him—not at all—but Jupiter was sure that he had never seen him before. Maybe he just didn’t like teenagers who interfered in police cases.

Jupiter followed Inspector Havilland to the cells of the prisoners on remand. In one of them, a young man was sitting on the bunk. When he saw Havilland, he jumped up. “Is this circus finally over? Can I go? You know what my father’s going to tell you, you lousy policeman? Do you know what this will cost you?”

Havilland ignored him and turned to Jupiter. “Do you recognize him?”

“Hard to say.” Jupiter looked at the young man. He had blond hair and blue eyes and looked like an incapacitated movie star. The whole left forearm was disfigured by a thick scar, where the stitches could still be seen. Apparently he had injured himself badly at some point.

He stared at Jupiter angrily. “He’s supposed to identify me? What is this nonsense? I’ve never seen this fat kid before in my life!”

“Well?” asked Havilland.

Jupiter shook his head. “I can’t tell, sir. The burglar at Mr Shreber’s house was also blond, but whether it’s the same man, I don’t know.”

“There you go,” said the prisoner mockingly. “There you go. I didn’t do it and you’ll be hearing from our lawyer, Havilland.”

“I’ll take my chances, Mr Fisher,” said Havilland, unmoved. “We do our work here, and your father knows it.” He nodded at the officer standing guard. “He’s free to go.”

The policeman unlocked the cell door and the young man walked out, sneered at Jupiter and left.

Jupiter turned to the inspector. “Fisher?”

“Curtis Fisher—son of the mayor.” Havilland’s mouth was a bit twitchy. “And I know it was him. Too bad you couldn’t identify him... but I don’t blame you.”

“You know he did it? How do you know it was him?”

“I know his silver sports car and I know Curtis Fisher... but I’m afraid that’s not proof.” He shook his head. “Maybe later we’ll find something to convict him.” He accompanied Jupiter to the door.

Pete and Bob were waiting in the anteroom. When Jupiter went through the door, they jumped up. “So? Was it the burglar?”

“I’m not quite sure. The inspector thinks he did it, but he had to let him go. Did you see him? A blond young man, wearing jeans and a red T-shirt, with a thick scar on his forearm.”

“Yes, he came by here,” said Pete. “Should we recognize him?”

Jupiter nodded. “We should take a closer look at him sometime.”

“Why?” asked Bob.

“Because he drives a silver sports car, his name is Curtis Fisher, and he sneered at me on the way out.”

“Fisher? Like the man who pawned the watch at Maruthers?” Bob wondered.

“Well,” said Pete doubtfully, “how many Fishers are there in Rocky Beach alone? Here in Waterside there will be a dozen or more. The mayor, for example, is Charles Fisher.”

“Curtis Fisher is his son,” Jupiter said and took a look at his watch. “Come on, we have to go. By the way, we are lucky sometimes—there is a policeman here who comes from India. He doesn’t seem to like me, but I’m sure he can decipher the writing on the photo! I promised Havilland I’d send it to him.”

14. The Watch Collector

Between dry bushes and cacti, the narrow, dusty road wound its way up the mountains. From time to time, Pete looked out of the window back at the sea of houses in the suburbs of Los Angeles, which was bordered by the mountains to the north and the Pacific Ocean to the west. Above the city itself, as always, hung a huge yellow smog bell, hiding the skyscrapers. Above it arched the bright blue Californian summer sky.

"I'm sweating myself to death," said Jupe. "Do we have anything to drink?"

Pete dug a water bottle out of the narrow area behind the back seat, drank it himself and handed it to the front. Both of the Beetle's windows were wide open, but the air stream was hot and didn't bring any cooling at all.

Doubtfully, Bob looked ahead up the road. "Are you sure this is the right place? I have a feeling that nobody lives up here at all!"

"It's the only road to the top," said Jupiter, looking at the map. "Just keep driving—we can't turn here anyway."

"Yes, otherwise we'll be back down much faster than we came up," Bob remarked. "Oh, wait! There's a house!"

Above the brown undergrowth, they saw a dark roof. They drove on and immediately stopped in front of a dark brown house, which had its best times in the forties. None of its occupants seemed to have ever bothered to renovate it. Everywhere on the outside walls, the plaster flaked off in large pieces. The window frames had never been painted and the shutters were crooked. All that remained of a garden was an old fence that enclosed a shaggy piece of wilderness and a crooked little shed.

It seemed to The Three Investigators that the house was occupied. There was a dusty blue car in front of the door and further tyre tracks revealed that another car had stopped and turned around here recently.

The three of them got out and went to the door. Jupiter pressed the bell and they heard the shrill sound echoing inside the house.

After a short time, a man opened the door. He was quite chubby and had a smart, friendly face under a curl of shaggy reddish hair. However, he frowned when he saw The Three Investigators.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Mr Sapchevsky?" Jupiter asked.

"Yes... and who are you?"

"We are investigators." Jupiter pulled a business card from his pocket and handed it to the man. "We are interested in an old pilot's watch that you bought some years ago from the Maruthers pawn shop. Mrs Maruthers gave us your address—"

Mr Sapchevsky's face became even darker. "So it was her!" he protested angrily. "How could she give out my address? I'm just a private collector. I won't have all of Los Angeles marching in here and robbing me!"

"Have you been robbed, sir?" Bob immediately asked.

"Indeed! Come on in and see the mess!" He pushed the door open and let The Three Investigators in. Then he walked ahead through a dark hallway where it was only slightly

cooler than outside. He led the boys into a room where the only window had no glass left and was nailed shut with planks. There were three glass display cabinets on the walls. All of them were broken open and empty.

"These cabinets," said Mr Sapchevsky angrily, "contained my watch collection until today. All gone! Every single piece! Do you have any idea how much a collection like that is worth?"

"What kind of watches were they?" Jupiter asked.

"Branded watches! Wristwatches! I love watches. I can't get enough of them, and now look at this mess!"

The Three Investigators nodded sympathetically. "Don't you have an alarm system?" Pete asked.

"Yes, I did," Mr Sapchevsky said even angrier. "She's now lying in the vet's surgery, hopefully recovering from the bullet wound those bloody criminals gave her!"

The Three Investigators looked at each other in shock. There had never been any talk of guns before! "We are sorry about that," said Jupiter. "Is your dog badly wounded?"

"She's not a dog," said the young man. "A goose—my guard goose, Nelly. She's better than any dog. But now they've shot her left wing clean through! So why are you interested in that particular watch?"

"We suspect it contains a clue to the solution of a mystery."

"Uh-huh... and this break-in wouldn't by any chance have anything to do with that mystery?"

"Well, we're not the only ones looking for the clue."

"Who else?"

Jupiter hesitated. "We are not sure."

"Do the police know?" continued Mr Sapchevsky.

"Well, Inspector Cotta of Rocky Beach—"

"Rocky Beach? What do they have to do with it? I thought you should be dealing with the Waterside police."

"We do not yet have enough evidence to—"

"Boy, the police are responsible for intelligence. If you know anything about this break-in, report it! I can't get my watches back, they're long gone, but I want those rascals under lock and key!"

"Yes, sir... but if you could tell us if you noticed anything unusual about that watch, it might help us and the police."

"Why would I have noticed anything unusual? I am just a collector. I buy watches and put them in my display cases. I wouldn't have noticed anything unusual."

"Really?" Jupiter asked astounded.

"No."

Bob and Pete giggled. The First Investigator gave them a poisonous look and turned to the collector again. "So you—"

"Wait here," said Mr Sapchevsky. "And don't move. I'll be right back." He turned around and walked out. They heard him go up the stairs, and then a door at the top of the stairs opened.

"What now?" Pete asked quietly.

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. "We'll wait. I suspect he's getting a list or something."

"He could have offered us something to drink," said Bob.

"We're probably lucky he didn't point a rifle at us and call the police." Jupiter went to the three broken display cases and looked closely at the traces. "The burglars were not

professionals. They used a screwdriver and simply damaged the locks.”

After a short time, Mr Sapchevsky returned. In his hand, he held three colour photos which he put on the table in front of The Three Investigators. They were razor-sharp images of the front and back of a sophisticated watch and the accompanying box.

“I’ll make you a proposal,” Mr Sapchevsky said. “Solve the mystery and then you come here and tell me what it was all about. Deal?”

“Deal!” said Jupiter. “Thank you very much! Can we take some photos of the broken cabinets and also check for fingerprints?”

“The police have already done that,” Mr Sapchevsky replied.

“But maybe we’ll find out something else.”

The collector hesitated. “All right. But hurry, I’m busy.”

Bob pulled the camera out of his pocket and snapped the display cabinets from several angles.

Meanwhile Pete took the fingerprint set out of the car and dusted the window frame and the cabinets. But immediately afterwards, he shook his head in disappointment. “They had gloves on. There are no usable prints. Mr Sapchevsky, did you actually hear the burglars?”

“No. I went for a little walk. When I heard Nelly scream, I ran back. Then I heard the shot. As I got to the house, I only saw two dark figures get into a car and drive away. When I entered the house, I saw the whole mess.”

“Could you make out what kind of car it was?” Bob asked.

“No, unfortunately.”

“We’ll look at the tyre tracks outside,” said Jupiter. “Goodbye, Mr Sapchevsky, and thanks again! Come on, fellas!”

“Goodbye,” said Mr Sapchevsky. “And don’t forget to come see me when this is all over.”

He accompanied them outside, watched them pour plaster over the tyre track, then closed the door.

“At last!” said Bob. “I thought we wouldn’t find out anything in this case! Show me the photos of the watch, Juve!”

Tensely they looked at the photos. The front of the watch showed a dial with several displays and did not look very interesting. On the back, however, there was an engraving:

Lt John Fisher
USS Dauntless

And on the inside of the box, they could see a note scribbled in a hasty, already quite faded handwriting:

Moby Dick
1-8, 4-2

Pete frowned. “Aha! It’s again ‘Moby Dick’ and a series of numbers.”

Jupiter rubbed his nose. “These numbers follow the same pattern as those Mr Shreber gave us in his letter. But, uh...” Then he suddenly pulled his brows together. “I just remembered something. Hold on.” He went back to the door and rang the bell.

Again it took a while before Mr Sapchevsky opened. Now he looked really angry. “What do you want now?”

“I only have one more question, sir,” Jupiter said politely. “Was the box together with the watch when it was stolen?”

The collector hesitated. “No. The box is the original one that the watch came in, and I have kept it in a drawer. Only the watch is in my display cabinet. Why?”

“Then maybe you should buy a new goose right away, but give her a bulletproof vest!”

“What?” cried Mr Sapchevsky in disbelief. “You don’t think they’re coming back?”

“I am convinced of it,” said Jupiter. “I’m sure you will have another visitor tonight... and we’ll lie in wait. This time the burglars won’t outrun us!”

15. An Investigator Disappears

Of course, Mr Sapchevsky did not agree with this. “It is out of the question. I will call the police. Let them catch the gang and take them away immediately. And you’re going home.”

“But then we cannot solve the mystery,” Jupiter objected.

“I don’t care. I’m not going to sit here idly and wait for a second burglary! Maybe I’ll get my watches back after all!”

“But the police will only catch part of the gang at most. The others—”

“They will betray their accomplices as soon as they are in jail,” Mr Sapchevsky said confidently. “It’s best to leave now while you can still see the road. It gets dark very quickly up here!” With that, he closed the door.

Jupiter looked to the west. The sun was actually already very low. He pondered for a moment and then nodded. “All right. Let’s hide the Beetle.”

“So you really want to stay here tonight?” Bob asked.

“Absolutely. We simply have to find out more about Rashura! And I think these people are too smart to just get caught. Let’s hide and see what happens!”

“But maybe nothing will happen,” Pete objected. “Why are you so sure that Rashura even knows that the watch box exists? Maybe they are already quite happy with the watch and the engraved name!”

Jupiter nodded. “If they don’t come back, we’ll think of something else. But I’m quite sure they know what they’re looking for—and I believe it’s the numbers. They could have taken the watch apart and found nothing, so they will be back. In any case, we’ll stay here...” He pointed to the sun, which now hung as a red ball deep above the sea. “In ten minutes, it will be dark and we won’t find our way down.”

They got into the car and drove it a little way away where Mr Sapchevsky could not see it from his house. For camouflage, they covered the car with dry undergrowth. When they finished, it was already so dark that they could hardly see each other. The moon had not yet risen and they found their way back to the house in the faint light of the stars. The air was still humid and much too warm, at least they would not freeze that night.

“Where are we hiding?” whispered Bob.

“In the goose house,” Pete suggested and pointed to the small shed that stood close to the house.

They crept there, slipped in—and were out again almost immediately. The shed stank so overwhelmingly of poultry poo that it brought tears to their eyes. “Phew! That won’t do at all,” gasped Jupiter. “We have to find another place!”

“How about the coal hatch at the house?” Bob suggested.

“That’s no good if we want to watch the outside as well.” Jupiter looked around. His eyes wandered over bushes and boulders. “Over there is dense undergrowth. We’ll crawl under it.”

A little later, they were lying on the warm ground with a roof of dry twigs above them. Pete and Bob took the opportunity to call home and tell their parents that they were camping in the mountains. Jupiter called Aunt Mathilda and told her the same thing. Then they made themselves comfortable and waited.

It was now very dark and very quiet. Again and again, The Three Investigators flinched when the wind rustled in the grass or branches moved nearby. A rabbit hopped past them, froze and raced away.

Then they heard a car engine and saw headlights. A car came up the hill and stopped in front of the house. The Three Investigators watched intently as one man got out and went to the door. The light above the door was turned on and they realized that the car was a police car.

"I didn't think the police would actually send anyone," whispered Jupiter. "But this is much too conspicuous. If Rashura is watching the house, they certainly won't come here now!"

The door opened.

"Hello!" said Mr Sapchevsky. His voice was very clear in the silent surrounding. "I have been expecting you. Would you like to come in?"

"No, thanks," said the policeman. "I just wanted to inform you that we have caught the gang. We have detained them and seized some valuable watches. I would like to ask you to come along and identify them."

The Three Investigators flinched. They recognized the voice immediately—it wasn't a policeman at all, but the man who had introduced himself to them as Taylor!

Mr Sapchevsky also seemed to notice that something was wrong, because he asked in surprise: "Now? Can't it wait till tomorrow?"

"Unfortunately not," Taylor said. "This is a very dangerous, internationally operating organization. Every minute counts..."

This sounded so implausible that the collector should have noticed it immediately. But apparently the hope of getting his watches back made him forget all caution.

"Very well," he said, and to the horror of The Three Investigators, he then looked past Taylor and shouted loudly into the darkness: "Hey! You three investigators! I know you're hiding there somewhere! You can come out now!"

Surprised, Taylor turned around. "What investigators?"

"Oh, just three boys playing Sherlock Holmes." Mr Sapchevsky laughed. "Boys! You can go home!" he shouted out again.

The Three Investigators did not move.

"Maybe they're not here after all," Taylor said after a break. "Are you coming?"

"Yes, of course. Just a minute." Mr Sapchevsky went back inside the house.

At that moment, Taylor walked back towards the car. The Three Investigators strained their eyes to see what he was doing, but all they could see was the reddish glow of the tail lights. A few seconds later, Taylor went back to the front door to wait for Mr Sapchevsky.

"We will not stand idly by and watch them take Mr Sapchevsky away!" mumbled Jupiter. "We won't be able to get the Beetle to follow them unnoticed. I think it is better for us to put a bug on the police car, and fast! Who among us will do it?" He took out a small transmitter from his pocket.

"I will," hissed Pete. "Give me that." He grabbed the bug from Jupiter's hand, pushed himself out of the bushes and crouched down along the fence.

Jupiter and Bob watched him anxiously. "We need a distraction," whispered Jupiter. "Taylor and the driver must not see Pete!"

"I'll take care of that." Bob crawled backwards out of the bushes, feverishly looking for a stone. Luckily, the police car's headlights were bright enough. He didn't find a stone, but a lump of earth about the size of a fist, which he weighed in his hand and then threw it at the

flap of the coal hatch. It cracked, the lump burst apart, Taylor drove around and Bob threw two more lumps of earth after it before diving back into the bushes.

Mr Sapchevsky was just coming out of the house. "Did you hear that?"

"Probably a cat," Taylor said. "Come on!"

"No, I have to check that out! That was too close to the house, and no cat makes that much noise!" He locked the front door and walked along the wall of the house to the coal hatch. Taylor followed him.

Jupiter and Bob watched as the two men examined the flap and found only a few lumps of earth.

"Strange," said Mr Sapchevsky. "Maybe some kind of animal."

He followed Taylor to the police car. They both got in and the car turned around. The beam of the headlights grazed the bushes where the two boys were lying in wait. They squeezed their eyes closed and pressed themselves even flatter on the ground. The light turned away and the car rolled slowly and carefully down the road. The sound of the engine died away.

"Quick now, after him!" Jupiter grabbed the case, crawled out of the bushes and jumped up. "Pete! Where are you?"

The Second Investigator did not answer.

"Pete!"

"You go find him," Bob said. "I'll get the Beetle!"

They each took out a flashlight and ran off in opposite directions.

Jupiter first looked at the spot where the police car had stopped. If Pete had crept up to the car from behind, he must have come from the small group of trees. He ran there and shone his flashlight between the gnarled trunks. "Pete?"

But there was no trace of Pete anywhere, and the police car was moving further and further away and would soon be out of reach!

"Pete! Where are you?"

At some distance, he heard the Beetle start up and then the light from the headlights shone through the night. Bob carefully manoeuvred the car over the uneven ground and stopped. "Is Pete there?"

"No, he did not answer! Listen! You follow that car! The receiver for the tracking device is on the back seat," Jupe said. "Don't do anything risky. Just follow them and find out where they have their hideout! Then come back and pick us up... and be careful."

"I always am." Bob reached for the receiver. "See you later." He drove off and steered the Beetle down the hill.

Jupiter shone around on the ground. There were no traces to be seen on the hard, dry ground. What was wrong with Pete? Why did he not answer?

But suddenly the wind blew a pungent smell towards him—a smell that did not belong here at all. Chloroform! An evil suspicion rose in Jupiter. He cursed himself for shouting so loudly, took another step forward and whispered: "Pete?"

Still no answer. Instead, a very strong arm suddenly wrapped around Jupiter's neck and pulled him backwards. A rough, dark voice whispered in his ear: "Stupid boys! Didn't Rashura tell you to stay out of this?"

Jupiter struck where he thought the perpetrator's face would be with the flashlight, but it only hit something hard that sounded like wood. A hand pressed a chloroform-soaked cloth over his mouth and nose and everything turned black.

16. Bob's Chase

It was not so easy to follow a fast moving police car with the help of a receiver and at the same time keep an eye on the road.

Bob made it down the hill but the very first time he looked at the receiver, he ran a red light. Luckily, there was not much going on in Waterside at this time. But after he almost landed in the window of a department shop the next time he looked, he stopped briefly and attached the device to the steering wheel. Now he could at least drive straight ahead.

He was a little angry with Pete because he had not returned in time. With three of them, a chase would have been much easier. Now he just had to make it on his own.

The police car in front of him was driven fast but not in a conspicuous manner. It sped through the deserted streets and then turned into the freeway heading towards Los Angeles. Bob became restless. Taylor wasn't going all the way to Los Angeles, was he? In the traffic chaos that prevailed there around the clock, they would be able to lose him and his Beetle without any trouble.

But after a short time, the police car turned west and was now heading back towards the sea. Every now and then, a car came from the opposite direction. Bob kept a distance of almost a hundred metres. The receiver beeped reliably and there were almost no turn-offs here anyway.

Suddenly the police car went faster. And after the next curve, Bob also realized why. A second police car followed the first and had its blue and red flashing lights on. Apparently the criminals had been unlucky enough to drive past a police car and of course, all the police officers in the vicinity had noted down the licence plate of the stolen police car.

Now Bob could only rely on the transmitter, because the two cars were much faster than he was, and easily outdistanced the Beetle. But once the transmitter was out of range, there was nothing he could do!

He accelerated and the Beetle rattled along. Far in front of him, the tail lights and the flashing light disappeared around a bend. When he finally reached there himself, there was nothing more to be seen of the two police cars. He took a look at the receiver. It beeped and pointed straight ahead—which didn't mean much on this winding road though.

Bob drove on and reached Glenview after a short time. But suddenly the signal faded the further he drove. Was the car behind him? Bob looked around in amazement and stopped. Immediately afterwards, a police car with flashing lights turned around a bend, came towards him and passed him. The police seemed to have lost the trail as well. Where was the stolen police car? Bob watched in his rear-view mirror as the police car turned a corner and the light went away. Suddenly he flinched. Fifty metres behind the Beetle, a car with its headlights off rolled out of a driveway, crossed the road and drove away.

"Very clever," he murmured, "but it still won't help you."

He turned around, switched off his headlights as well and followed the stolen car at a reasonable distance. The road led into Glenview Industrial Park. On both sides of the road were huge warehouses and parked trucks, between which Bob with his yellow Beetle felt like a dwarf. By this time, the area was deserted.

So where was the stolen police car? The receiver pointed to the right, but there was nowhere to turn. All gates were closed. But suddenly the beeping changed again. The car had stopped—and it was somewhere very close by.

Bob steered the Beetle to the side of the road between two trucks and hoped that the fake policemen would not see his small yellow vehicle when they pulled out. Then he got out, drew a question mark with his green chalk on the ground as a precaution and ran off. Jupiter had said not to do anything risky, so he decided to stay out of sight and just watch what happened.

He looked around searching. There it was! The police car was parked in front of the premises of a large haulage company. Two dark figures got out and rushed along the road. Two? Why only two? Where was Mr Sapchevsky?

Bob used the cover of the huge trucks at the side of the road and followed them. Every twenty paces, he stopped and scribbled a question mark on the ground or on a concrete pillar.

As he passed the police car, he risked a look inside. Mr Sapchevsky was not there. Had they dropped him off somewhere along the way? Maybe it was during their secret turning manoeuvre to outwit the real police officers. He cursed himself that he hadn't looked into the road when he drove past. But if this was not an abduction, why did they take Mr Sapchevsky with them in the first place?

Suddenly he heard an electronic humming. Immediately he stopped, ducked and crept on carefully. Again the buzzing sounded. As he peered out from behind a truck, the two figures had disappeared.

They must have entered one of the yards. Bob drew an arrow in the direction where he had last seen the men, dashed across the road and immediately ducked behind a truck again. Then he crept up to the next gate. Behind it was a large yard with a warehouse and several smaller sheds. In front of one of the sheds was an old pick-up truck with a protruding bonnet. The two men just entered the warehouse and closed the door behind them.

Bob looked up and sized up the gate—two and a half metres of steel grid with iron spikes at the top. That was manageable. Obviously, he had ignored Juve's advice not to do anything risky. He just had to be careful not to slip off the bars.

Anyway, he pulled the chalk out of his pocket again and drew a question mark on one of the gate pillars. Then he stepped back a few metres, ran, and took two steps up the bars. In a flash, he reached between the iron spikes and held onto the bars. Then he carefully pulled himself over the gate and ended up in the courtyard. Immediately he scurried into the shadow of the warehouse.

He had to try to eavesdrop on the men. Who were they? What were they up to? Maybe he could lead the police officers here to the gang's hideout. Actually he should have done that earlier, but now it was too late.

Under the shadow's cover, he crept along the wall of the warehouse and discovered a broken window through which a dim light fell. This was the opportunity! Bob crept past the old pick-up truck and ducked under the window.

And then he heard a deep, threatening growl behind him.

Bob froze.

17. Bob is Captured

Slowly, very slowly, he turned around. Less than five steps away from him stood a Doberman—a huge, black-brown dog whose braided teeth shone in the light of the street lamp.

Bob swallowed. His throat was suddenly completely dry. He didn't move a millimetre and tried not to look directly into the dog's eyes. He had read somewhere that such dogs could feel threatened and would attack otherwise. He wished he had a chocolate bar or something edible in one of his pockets to distract the dog, but unfortunately this was not the case. And he didn't really believe that the dog, who was sitting there lurking and watching his every move, would be distracted by anything. Bob tried desperately to remember what else was in the book. His experiences with other pet dogs didn't help him here. The dog in front of him was a monster!

'Stop, don't run away,' he thought. Perhaps he could talk to the dog in a friendly manner. Well, he didn't have many options anyway so he tried to give his slightly trembling voice a calm tone.

"Good doggy," he whispered. "I won't hurt you. I'm just going for a walk... you don't mind, do you?"

The dog growled louder.

"Hmm... apparently so. Okay. I'm just going to walk backwards very slowly... like this." He took a step backwards. The dog growled and started to bark.

Desperately, Bob looked around. The pick-up truck was only a few metres away parked next to a shed. That was his only chance! He took one look at the warehouse entrance, then at the dog, and then he sprinted off. The Doberman raced after him as if shot out from a cannon. Bob reached the truck, grabbed the wing mirror and swung himself up to the bonnet, just as the dog's teeth collapsed with an ugly noise very close behind him, biting and ripping off a part of his trouser leg. Bob saw that the dog was about to jump at him again. Hastily, he climbed further onto the roof of the truck. From here, if he managed to pull himself up two metres, he could get to the corrugated metal roof of a shed.

He did not need to think further. The dog leapt onto the bonnet and Bob gave him a kick that threw him back down. Bob reached for the roof of the shed and grabbed the gutter. Then he quickly pulled himself up and rolled onto the roof. At the ground level, the dog raged, jumped up and barked like crazy.

Suddenly, the warehouse door was pushed open. "Silence!" cried a man's voice. "Be quiet, Apollo!"

Apollo stopped barking, ran to the man, whimpered and barked again.

"Quiet, I said!"

The dog became silent and only whimpered.

"Good dog. Lie down."

Apollo lay down like a sphinx and looked up to his master. Bob slipped silently out of sight. The warehouse door slammed shut and the sound echoed far through the silent night.

For a while, Bob lay still and waited for his heartbeat to calm down. That had been close! When he was sure that nobody in the warehouse had noticed him, he got up and crept over the shed roof. He didn't yet know how he was going to leave the yard, but he would certainly

think of something else. The most important thing now was to eavesdrop on these men, otherwise his efforts would all have been in vain.

The shed stretched along the warehouse and Bob crept to the end where he saw a small courtyard below. He could also see a door at the side of the warehouse. Perfect! Bob jumped down from the shed roof and crept to the door. With extreme caution, he pushed the handle down. The door opened—and in front of him stood a guard with a gun in his hand. Apollo sat panting next to him and it looked like he was grinning at Bob.

“It works every time,” the man said. “Come in, boy.”

Bob was paralyzed. The man approached him and pulled him into the warehouse, which was packed with boxes and containers, and then pushed him forward. “Hey, Boss! Look what I found at the back door! I told you my Apollo won’t bark for no reason!”

Taylor and two other men, standing in a free space between the boxes, turned around. One of the two strangers was a grey-haired man in a black business suit, the other looked like a typical bodyguard from a crime thriller of the fifties. He wore a hat and suit and had a smooth, meaningless face with evil eyes.

“Damn!” Taylor took it away when he recognized Bob. “What’s he doing here? Those boys are a nuisance!”

“You know this boy, Taylor?” asked the grey-haired man. He sounded like authority and the fake policeman nodded. “Yes, Boss. This is one of those kiddie detectives that Shreber gave the photo to.”

“Ah, yes, the photo you took from them. We’ll talk about that later.”

The guard pushed Bob towards the group and Taylor grabbed him by his T-shirt and pulled him towards him. “Did you follow us? Did you call the police on us? Where are your friends? Talk, you little rascal!”

“Save yourself the trouble, Taylor,” his boss said. “The boy won’t tell us anything or just tell a bunch of lies to buy time. The police are probably already on their way here. We’ll take him with us.”

“What for?” Taylor asked angrily and pushed Bob away. “Why don’t we just get rid of him?”

“Not yet,” said the other and Bob felt a chill run over him. “We could still use him. Tie him up, blindfold him and let’s get out of here.” He approached Bob while Taylor blindfolded him. “Boy, you’re gonna regret messing with us.”

“The police will catch you,” Bob said, hoping it sounded brave.

The man ignored him. “Let’s go!”

Taylor grabbed Bob by the arm and pushed him forward. “Now we’re going on a nice long trip,” he said with a grin. “Too bad you won’t be writing any postcards to your friends.”

18. Rashura's Fire

"Jupe?" whispered someone next to him. "Jupe! Wake up!"

He heard a groan and assumed that it came from himself.

"Jupe!" Now he recognized the voice—it was Pete!

"Where... were you?" Jupe mumbled. When he opened his eyes, everything was dark, above him a black tangle of branches was pricking against the starry night sky. He lay on his side and could not move his arms. When he tried, he realized that his wrists were tied behind his back. Pete had managed to sit up, but he was tied up too.

"What happened?" Jupe moaned.

"Rashura got me," Pete said. "And then you, it seems. And then he put us here nice and neat." He swallowed. "Jupe, we messed with a demon."

"With a what?" His head wasn't working right yet. "Did you just say a demon?"

"I did. Let's get out of here—as soon as possible!" Pete urged. "Where's Bob?"

"He's following the police car."

"Does this mean we don't have a car?" Suddenly, there was panic in Pete's voice. "Jupe, we have to get out of here!"

"First of all we have to get rid of these shackles. Did you manage to plant the bug?"

"Yes, but when I wanted to hide, this... this thing was waiting for me. It wasn't a human being, Jupe. It's face had a hideous, distorted grimace! And it knocked me down. When I regained consciousness, I was lying here. And I can't get your shackles or mine off... I've already tried."

"But all this is only logical if he is a man, not a demon. A demon would not knock us down, chloroform us, and tie us up," Jupiter reasoned. "Anyway before I fainted, I managed to see it running towards the house!"

"He's in the house?" Pete exclaimed.

"I don't know if he's still inside..." Jupiter replied.

"Anyway, I wouldn't go in there even if I wasn't tied up!" Pete insisted. "Wait! You're not thinking of going into the house, are you?"

"Pete, that's not a demon! There are no ghosts and demons. Everything can be explained rationally and logically. We have so often—"

"I know! I know! But maybe this time, this is a demon! And maybe there are even more! And even if it's a man, which I don't believe—he's dangerous!"

"You might actually be right about that." Jupiter stared past him to the house and his throat was suddenly very tight. Despite the heat, an icy shiver ran down his back. "Dangerous—or insane."

"Why?" Pete followed his gaze, and then he saw it too.

Behind the window panes, it flickered red.

The house was on fire! And the fire spread at breakneck speed!

They both knew what happened when a fire broke out in the Californian wilderness. Every year, hundreds of square kilometres of forest land fell victim to fires set by negligence or deliberate action or caused by lightning—and often enough, houses are caught as well.

“Let’s get out of here!” Pete pulled himself together. “Let’s hot-wire Sapchevsky’s car and get out of here.”

“And how, with your hands tied behind your back?” Jupiter rolled around and stood up with difficulty. “We have to get inside!”

“Are you crazy? There’s a fire—and that maniac is probably still in there!”

“But inside the house we’ll find a knife to cut the ropes!”

“But we can’t get in, Jupe—Mr Sapchevsky should have locked the door!”

“Rashura must have got in somehow!”

“Yes, maybe through a window!”

“We’ll see about that,” Jupe said.

They ran to the house. On the first floor, the fire roared and crackled. Suddenly, a window pane shattered and a hail of tiny shards flew through the air. The glow of the fire lit up the whole mountaintop. The heat brought sweat to the two boys’ foreheads. When they reached the door, they found that it was open.

“There you go!” Jupiter rushed in. At the same moment, a dark figure collided with him. Both went down and Jupe heard an object fall onto the floor. The dark figure quickly got up, pushed Pete aside and ran out of the house.

The heat took Pete’s breath away. “Jupe! Are you okay?”

“Yes—” Jupiter rolled to the side. “Quick, to the kitchen!”

They ran along the hallway, past the burning stairs. With a bit of luck, Pete pushed open the first door with his foot and they actually found themselves in the kitchen. Coughing and with watery eyes, they looked around.

“There! By the sink!” cried Jupiter.

Pete looked up and saw a knife block containing several large kitchen knives. He ran over, turned around and with his bound hands, struggled to pull a knife out. Then he cut Jupiter’s shackles and, in turn, Jupiter took the knife and freed Pete.

“Now let’s get out of here!” Jupe yelled.

They rushed back to the hallway towards the main door—and stopped as if rooted to the ground. The front part of the house had caught fire and it was not possible for them to reach the door. They quickly looked around, and there was no other way out. Very quickly, they were surrounded by fire.

“Now what?” cried Pete over the roar of the flames.

Jupiter thought in a flash. “Find the entrance to the basement! We have to go down there. That’s our only chance!”

As Jupiter was about to run off, he kicked something and it slid across the floor. Then he remembered that something dropped down when the intruder ran into them. He reached down and touched a hard object. He grabbed it and held on to it. It was some sort of round object that looked like an uneven shell with hair around it.

“Hey, Jupe!” Pete shouted. “I found the basement door! Hey! Where are you? Are you coming or what?”

“Coming!” Jupe ran off, leaping through lambent flames. When he reached the basement door, Pete had already opened it. In the glow of fire behind, they saw a narrow staircase.

“I can hardly see the stairs but I’ll go first,” Pete decided.

He felt his way down the stairs. Jupiter closed the door behind him and they were in complete darkness.

“Hey! Why did you close the door?” Pete yelled. “Now I can’t see the way down!”

“The door might stop the fire from reaching us,” Jupe yelled back. “Do you have a flashlight?”

Pete fumbled in his pocket and took out a small flashlight and shone the way down. Finally, they reached the bottom of the stairs.

“We can’t stay here!” Pete coughed. “The fire can still reach us—”

In the dim glow of Pete’s flashlight, they saw a corridor with three doors. The first opened into a tool room, the second into a tiny sauna and behind the third one was a staircase that led further down. A gush of cold air struck them.

They ran down and Jupiter closed the heavy door behind him. At the bottom, they found themselves in a small underground room from which there was no way out. Only on the ceiling was there a tiny grated air shaft. The room was a kind of storage room with shelves full of cans, a small camping cooker and even a camp bed. And on one of the shelves was a gas lamp. Pete switched it on but unfortunately that didn’t help them much. They were trapped!

“Who among us has the mobile phone?” Pete asked.

Jupiter pulled a face. “Bob... but even if we had it, there’d be no reception down here. This is some sort of emergency bunker.”

Pete sat down on the floor. “I guess we’ll die now.”

“Possible,” Jupiter said absent-mindedly. His gaze lay on the object he had picked up in the hallway and had taken with him. “Shine the light over here, Pete.”

Jupe held up the thing so that Pete could shine on it. It was a wooden mask with a face twisted into a grimace. The eyes were sunken and glowed red with rage; the hair was dishevelled; and protruding out of the mouth were small fangs and an excessively long tongue. The mask was painted red, white and black and surrounded by a fringe of black animal fur. All in all, it looked strange, scary, and threatening.

“This is a mask of a fierce deity or a demon, probably from India or Indonesia,” Jupiter said. “When you said you saw the demon, did it look like this mask?”

“Something like this,” Pete recalled. “I can’t be sure as I was fainting.”

“You know what, Pete? You could be right,” Jupiter said. “If this represents Rashura, then yes, Rashura could well be a demon. Anyway, the tongue sticking out reminds me of Kali, the Hindu goddess of death and destruction.”

“This is exactly what I wanted to hear in the last seconds of my life,” Pete said bitterly. At that very moment, they heard the house collapse above them.

*To be continued in
Part II: Flaming Waters.*